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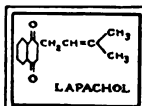
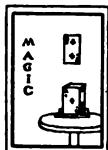
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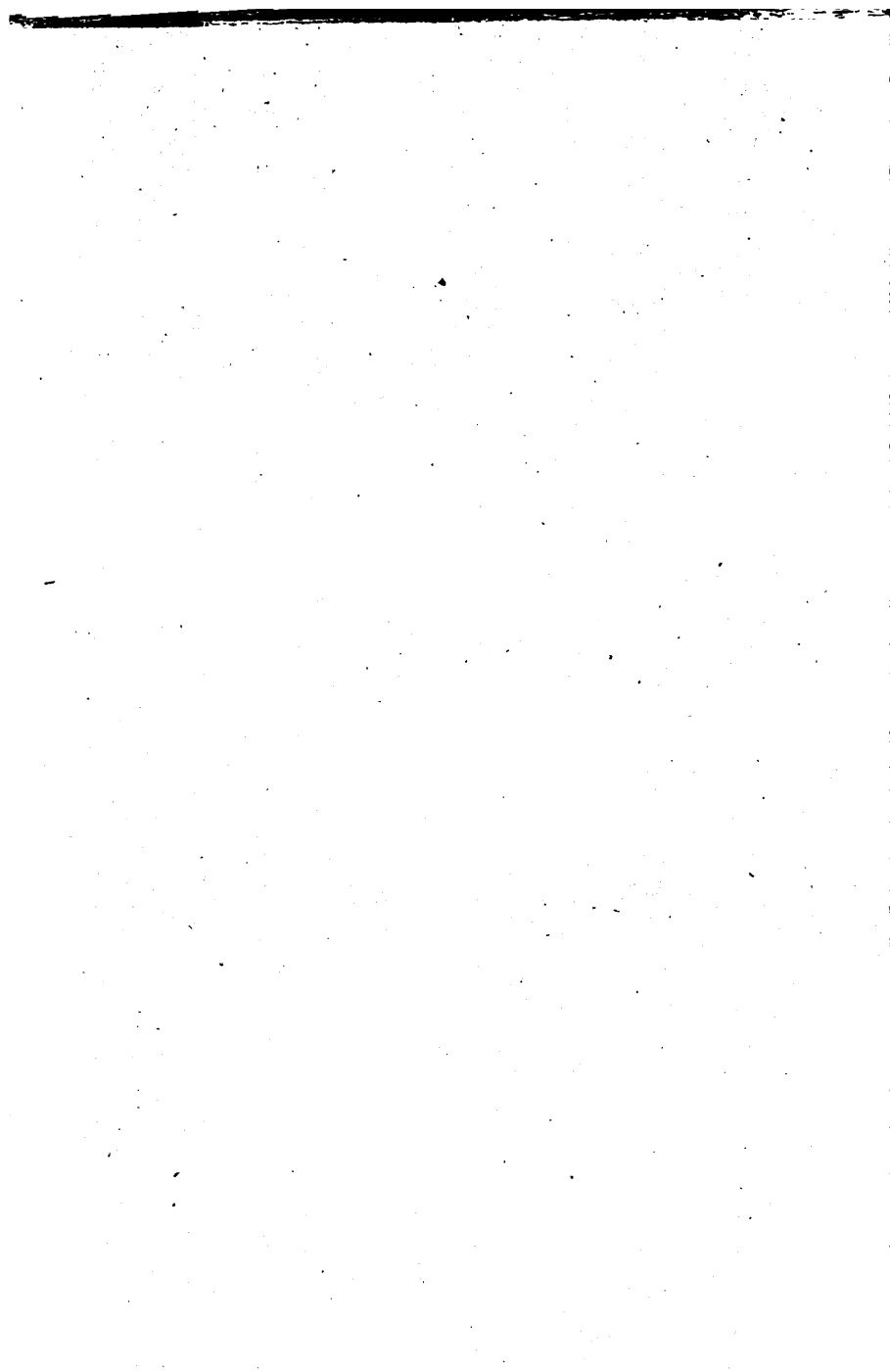


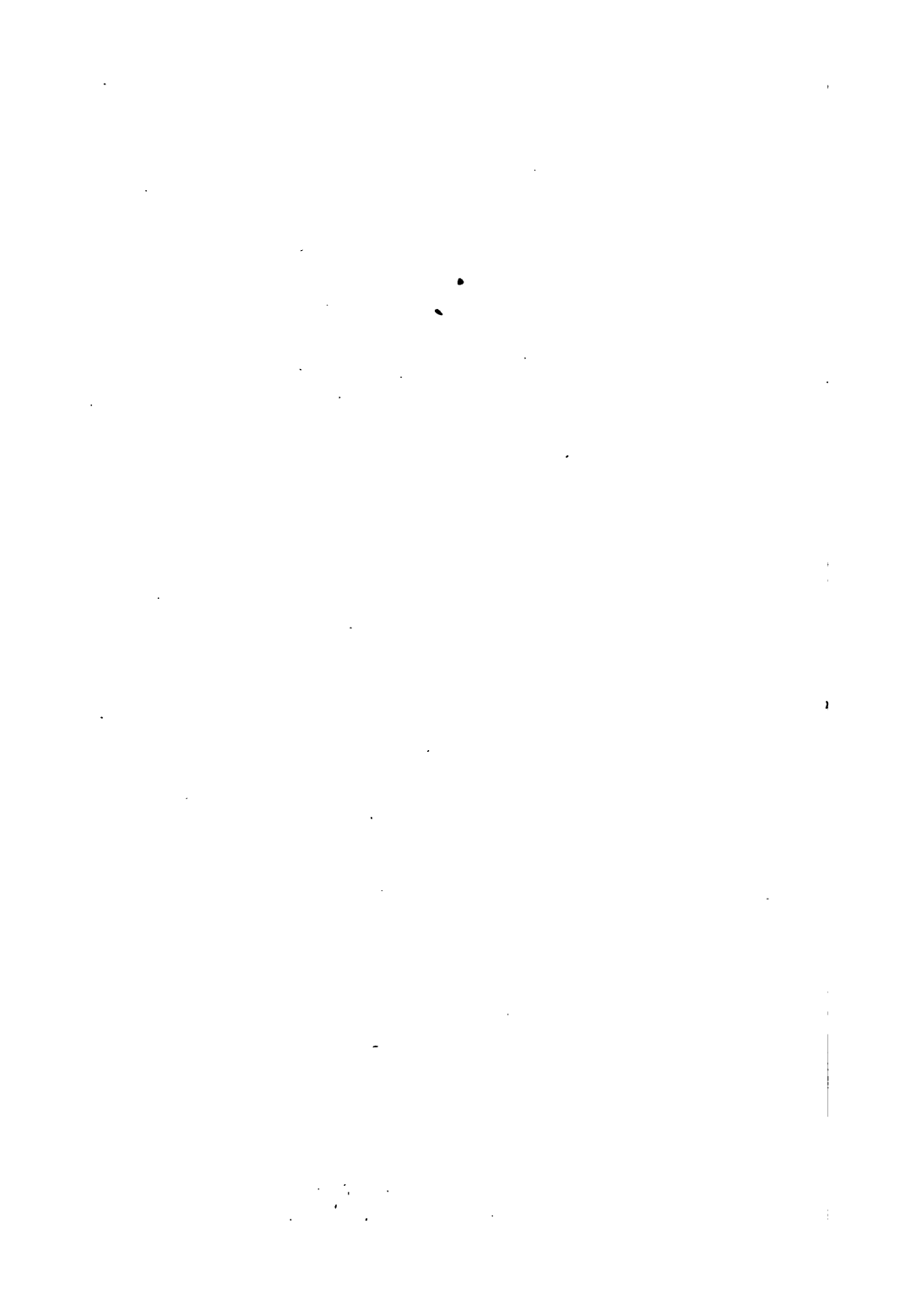


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A MODERN MAGICIAN.

A Romance.

^{Joseph} BY ^{ac}
J. FITZGERALD MOLLOY,

AUTHOR OF

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"ROYALTY RESTORED ; OR, LONDON UNDER CHARLES THE SECOND ;"

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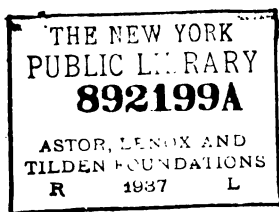
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TO HIM WHO IN THESE PAGES IS STYLED

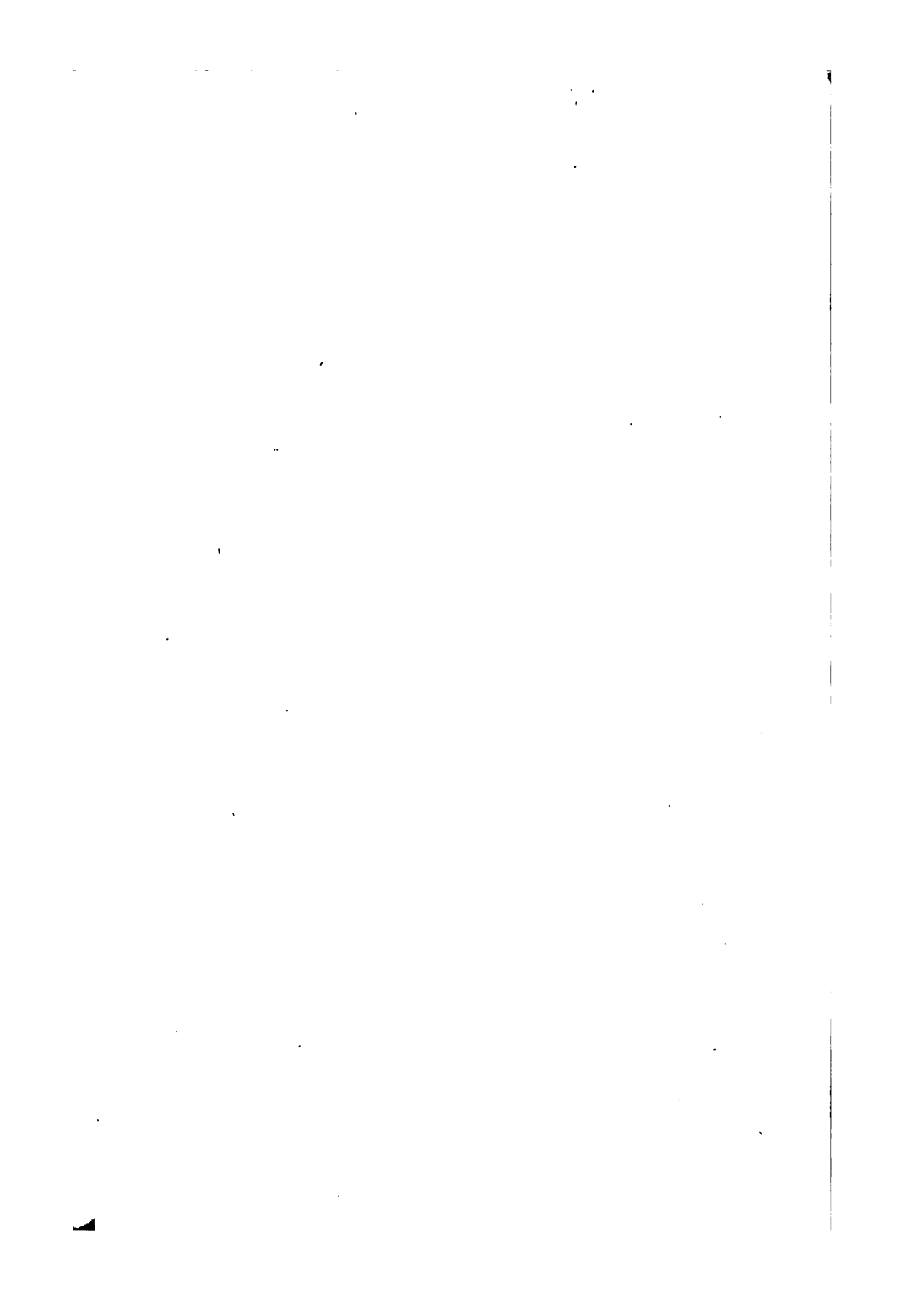
BENONI,

THIS STORY IS DEDICATED

IN SIGN OF SERVICE.

"We live in an age when none has the courage to acknowledge the wonders he has beheld: for if one should declare the miracles he has wrought or has witnessed, the world will declare him mad. Better silence and action."

ELIPHAS LEVI.



CONTENTS.

	PAGE
CHAPTER I.	
AMUNI THE FAITHFUL ONE	1
CHAPTER II.	
THE STORY OF HER LIFE	35
CHAPTER III.	
TRIUMPH AND TEMPTATION	68
CHAPTER IV.	
HUSBAND AND WIFE	109
CHAPTER V.	
A DARK DAY	125
CHAPTER VI.	
LORD KERRY CONVERSES	164
CHAPTER VII.	
PHILIP'S SEARCH	194

A MODERN MAGICIAN.

CHAPTER I.

AMUNI THE FAITHFUL ONE.

THE day appointed for Philip Amerton's interview with Amuni arrived. The feverish eagerness with which he awaited its approach had now vanished, leaving him abstracted, weary and depressed. From morning until night the sky had been overcast, the atmosphere was warm and humid; no sunshine had pierced the grey mass of drifting cloud, rain had fallen heavily from time to time.

All day long Philip had sat alone in his study, not working but thinking. Problems which of old had frequently

beset him rose up once more, confronted, questioned, perplexed him, demanded answers. What was this strange combination of spirit and matter, action and desire, aspirations and grovelling, this mystery of all ages called man? Was he merely an animal whose highest happiness was bounded by appetites, sensations, passions; or was his form but the outward covering of an intangible essence called soul, clothing itself in mortality at birth, regaining invisibility and freedom at death? Did the liberated spirit awaken to living realities on quitting the outworn garment wrought of flesh and sinew, or become a mere phantom in a world of shadows, or returning again to earth enveloped in another body, work out its mission in obedience to a higher law? From whence have men started and to where do they tend? Surely not to nothingness. Decease cannot destroy

but merely change the soul's condition. Verily the past was something more than a mighty burial vault, drear as death, silent as time, darker than night.

He raised his eyes, fraught with sadness, upwards, but clouds, restless and sombre as his thoughts shut out all light.

Was man's life but as a breath? Was heaven above, with its glorious sun, its limitless dome crowded with stars, wondrous, mysterious, innumerable; its powerful winds that swept the world and lashed vast seas to madness; its moon that lulled them into calm; was the earth with its teeming fruitfulness and uncounted treasures, mighty mountains and wide plains, all made that man might enjoy them but for a brief space. Was he as a traveller resting for a night at a way-side inn, to journey at dawn towards strange lands he knows not of but seeks? Did the human race, generation after

generation, march in an unending procession from the hill-top of life down weary roadways of years into the valley of shadow and death to exist no more? Men had come without consent or option into light and consciousness, and passed away without will or choice into silence and darkness, as ships that rise and sink upon the horizon and leave no trace upon the sea. He rose wearily and walked backwards and forwards impatient, restless, weighed with sadness.

Why did he seek to solve the mysteries of creation; the motives of man's entrance into and exit from the world; the strange secrets of promptings, inclinations, loves, hatreds, passions, hopes and fears that filled humanity's heart? His very earnestness placed him at odds with his kind. Why could not he eat, drink and make merry, careless if his life went out with to-morrow's sun?

When the dinner bell had rung he descended, to find his wife dressed and beaming with anticipated pleasure. She was going to a theatre in company with Mrs. Rochester, and paid no heed to his pale face and haggard looks, but rattled on concerning the play and players she was about to see. He sat at the table, but neither ate nor drank. Neither had he the desire nor spirits to answer his wife's remarks; but she, as if anxious silence should not exist on this occasion, spoke volubly concerning he knew not what. When she had finished dinner he rose with relief and went back to his study, from whence he heard the roll of the carriage which bore her in search of pleasure.

How terribly alone in life he seemed. It was pitiful that the woman whom of all others he had selected as his wife was unable to approach him in that

inner world of thoughts and feelings where he continually dwelt. Must he for ever exist a solitary man? Without admitting the fact to himself, he was yet aware his affections were flung upon barren ground choking their infinite possibilities. To what depths they might have taken root, to what heights they might have grown, nourishing and beautifying life if given to more congenial soil, he dared not think.

It was almost midnight when he left his home, rain was falling steadily, a cold wind blew in his face. Wrapping his inverness around him and pulling his hat over his eyes, he strode forward rapidly, resolved he would walk to his destination, and by bodily exertion allay if possible the tumult of thoughts whirling through his brain.

Entering High Street, Kensington, he found that thoroughfare almost deserted,

the flagway glittered with wet, reflecting the yellow light of dim lamps ; the only sounds reaching his ears were the cries of cabdrivers anxious to secure fares, and the chiming of clocks, whose sounds, muffled by the heavy atmosphere, fell like sad funereal music on his ears. Stars were blotted from the sky ; one dense pall-like cloud spread above the silent city ; nature was in her saddest mood. On such a night might troubled lives seek quick extinction in black and whirling tides ; might murder grapple with its victims and hide its blood-reeking hands in unfathomable darkness ; might fiends perpetrate nameless deeds ; might madness scream unheard by pitiless heaven, and ghostly visitants haunt the homes of men.

As Philip walked rapidly onwards—the night wind flitting past him voiceful with the wail of lost souls—his heart sunk,

weighted by fears he dared not analyse. Pursuing his dreary way he entered old Kensington Road; scarce a footfall sounded on his ears; the roll of wheels, heard for a moment, was quickly lost in lengthening distance; the houses on either side were dark and silent.

One home he passed whose well-lighted windows pierced the blackness. From within came notes of lively music, sounds of merry voices, and the quick patter of feet. Looking up, he saw the figures of dancers pass and repass, floating before his sight against a brilliant background; but in a moment he had left this vision behind, and was again alone with darkness.

At last he paused before a square-built, desolate-looking house isolated from its neighbours and surrounded by a forlorn garden in which poplar trees, tall, shadowy, and gaunt, rose like churchyard

phantoms. Lying far back from the highway as if shrinking from human intercourse, the dwelling was separated from the footpath by high grey weather-beaten walls and a strong gate, rusty with age. Above this rose a pointed arch, composed of two iron bars. A ring, from which a lantern was wont to hang, was yet suspended from the centre, and at the sides were link extinguishers like inverted cornucopiæ corroded by lack of paint and long disuse. The sombre bearing of the house was intensified at such an hour as this; gloom dwelt within it; blackness covered it as with a shroud.

In answer to his touch, the loud peal of a bell rang through the night, and, ceasing by slow degrees, marked the silence by contrast of its sound. No light became visible; the windows seen above the high grey walls stared blankly into space like sightless eyes; no movement

was heard from within. Raindrops fell from the poplar trees upon the black earth like tears upon a coffin-lid. The sound of ivy leaves shivering on the wall seemed as the rustling of cerements. Amerton's heart sunk. Was this most melancholy mood of nature sent as a mute warning against the step he was about to take? Did the elements sorrow over his self-selected fate? Impressionable to all influences, the night had communicated its trouble to his soul. Yet no definite thought of swerving from his resolution entered his mind.

Once more he rang the bell, and now his summons was answered. The house-door opened, footsteps were heard on the flagged pathway of the desolate garden, a key turned slowly in a lock, and the gate was swung open. Then from out the darkness came Benoni's voice :

“Peace be on you.”

Amerton entered without response, the gate closed behind him, and Benoni in silence preceded him to the house. In the long marble-paved hall, dark save for the light of a flickering lamp and chilling in its coldness, Philip removed his hat and coat, and still following his host, crossed a passage to the left, when they arrived at a heavy oak door. Here Benoni paused a moment, raised the lamp above his visitor's head, and calmly surveyed his pale anxious face. A look of mingled tenderness and compassion rested in the mystic's eyes, he opened his lips as if to speak, then hesitated and remained silent. Flinging open the door, he ascended a narrow winding stair leading to an octagon-shaped apartment, which had been built for and used as an observatory.

Lofty in height and spacious in size, it was surmounted by a glass dome, from

which hung a curiously wrought bronze lamp, that, leaving the upper part of the room in shadow, cast a soft mellow light below. The walls were hung with purple silk wrought in threads of gold with phrases in Eastern tongues, cabalistic figures, and mystic symbols. At the north end stood a tripod supporting a vessel in which yellow flames burned, diffusing heat and fragrance; before a closed shrine a violet-coloured lamp flickered. The floor was covered with skins of beasts; a massive folio, bound in vellum and fastened with strong clasps, lay upon an altar of white marble, behind which hung an oval mirror; a great crystal was placed upon a stand, the legs of which represented coiled bodies of serpents; charts of the heavens were spread on a desk close by; velvet couches lined the walls.

The room and its belongings seemed

strangely familiar to Amerton. Though he had never set his foot within it, he was distinctly conscious of having seen it before, of noting its furniture, feeling its warmth, inhaling its fragrant atmosphere.

"Yes," replied Benoni, answering his thoughts, "you have been here before, not in the flesh but in the spirit."

"Have you beheld me?"

"Plainly as I see you now," replied the mystic.

"Did you summon me here?"

"No, my friend. When your body was cast into deep sleep, your spirit escaping from its prison-house, rushed forward on the wings of desire, seeking here the knowledge for which it hungers and thirsts. Your spirit it is which, affording you no peace until fully satisfied, has brought you here to-night. The things of earth cannot gratify your nature for

long. Union with a beautiful woman, wealth sufficient for your desires, a name distinguished amongst men, friends in abundance are yours, and yet beyond these is something higher which you desire."

"What you say is even true," replied Amerton. "And yet times there were when I have been indifferent to the acquirement of higher knowledge, when the fascination all things mystic held for me vanished; but soon the troubled longing to penetrate the secrets of a world on the border-land of which I stood returned with increased strength."

"Do you not know," replied Benoni, "that in many persons divers inclinations and contradictory feelings are centred? These are oftentimes the jarring remnants of past existences warring with the present life. You are the outcome of ages. Not your body, which in a few seconds can

be rendered inanimate, and before the sun rises reduced to ashes; but your spirit, which has previously inhabited many bodies and bears some trace of each dwelling. That you have no distinct remembrance of former existences is due to the sleep-like rest which for certain periods follows bodily demise; but the experiences of your past lives rest with your spirit."

"Why does it return?"

"The All Merciful sends it back, that by good deeds it may work its way upwards to eternal rest, which is bliss. At present your soul has reached a point where it triumphs above the contending influences of former lives; and only the possession of knowledge, the certainty of power will satisfy you henceforth."

"Then," said Amerton, "I have lived more lives than one."

"Yes; you have existed in many ages and in many countries. In your last incarnation you led a high but not the highest life; it was necessary you should come into the world again. The intuition and imagination which enable you, with little experience, to penetrate character and depict romance, is but accumulated observation stored in your consciousness ages ago."

Philip wondered much at what he heard. "Shall this be my last life?" he asked.

"That rests with yourself," replied the mystic, rising from where he sat and facing Amerton. "And now," he asked, "have you the courage to meet my master face to face?"

"I have," Philip answered resolutely.

It was not alone the wind wailing through the poplar trees outside which caused him to shudder; a sudden numb-

ness shot through his veins; it seemed as if the hand of death gripped his heart.

Benoni took off his slippers, and removing his velvet robe, clad himself in a garment of white linen that fell in many folds to his feet. Upon its hem were worked in silver threads the cabalistic signs of the nine orders of celestial angels; on its breast was a pentagram, around which were wrought the sacred names JHUH, ADNI, AHIH, AGLA; on its skirt were the four symbols of the cabala, with the names of the seven great archangels, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Asrael, Samael, Zadkiel, and Oriphiel. On the right sleeve, raised in selenite, were the mystic letters A Z O T H, and on the left the word AGLA. Taking a rod of silver, set with crystals, he traced a circle on the floor and in the air, repeating many prayers the while; then filling a censer with burn-

VOL. II. 17

ing sandal-wood from the tripod, he sprinkled it with powder, and instantly clouds arose whose perfume drenched the senses with delight. Censer in hand, he walked around the circle three times seven, repeating in low tones an incantation, musical and weird.

Amerton, beholding him in silence, saw that though without the circle all was obscure with incense smoke, yet within all was clear and bright as day. But even as he gazed the mellow radiance of the wrought lamp paled before a lustre whose source was unseen, which, like a column of moonlight reflected on an ocean, descended obliquely, illuminating the space within the circle with exceeding brilliancy. Outside its circumference all became dark as death, yet its blackness throbbed as if peopled with innumerable hosts of speechless phantoms, the stealthy movements of whose sinew-

less limbs Amerton fancied he could hear amidst the awful spell of soul-depressing silence.

Winds, cold as the air of charnel-houses, swept round him, stilling the coursing blood in his veins and freezing the marrow in his bones. Nameless, momentarily deepening terror descended upon him, of which he felt powerless to rid himself by act or will. He could see the figure of Benoni in his white robe standing within the circle, his eyes closed, his head bowed, his arms extended, his lips moving as if in prayer. And Philip, listening, heard him say: "O follower of Gautama, son of Mayadevi, who wears the heavens on his finger as a sapphire ring; who holds in his right hand the keys of the gates of Everlasting Light; thou Amuni, the Faithful One, who camest forth wise from the womb; whose days have out-

numbered ages, who hast conquered death; who hast begun to tread the sunlit road leading to Nirvana; whose heart is a mine of wisdom; whose speech is as a gift of silver, vouchsafe to appear before one whose desire is to become thy pupil and thy servant, that the doubts of his mind may depart; deign to speak with him, for he with hope and joy thy words awaiteth."

He paused a moment, as if awaiting some desired sight or sound. The dense black atmosphere without the circle quivered with unseen life; faint whispers of inarticulate words fled past Amerton, who sat motionless, absorbed, and impatient from expectancy.

After awhile Benoni continued:

"O follower of Gautama, son of Mayadevi, the obviator of difficulties, the son of Exalted Fame, on whose two celestial feet the world is gazing; whose brow is

resplendent of many moons ; whose smile is more sweet than honey dropping from the comb ; whose words are as the waters of life ; whose lips disperse the sorrows of his servants ; thou Amuni, the Faithful One, delight the sight of this neophyte with a vision of thy form ; comfort his spirit with thy wisdom-dropping speech ; strengthen with thy counsel his soul languid as the drooping wings of a tired dove. The firmament of his mind is obscured by clouds of doubt ; spread beams luminous with spiritual light across its darkness that his path may be clear. Let his heart be agitated by thy presence as waves of the deep are stirred by the lunar orb ; for his soul, consumed by a fever of longing to behold thy face, already floats toward thee on wings of desire. O Amuni, hear thy servant's voice and be gracious to his prayer."

Scarce had his last words trembled

into silence, when a stroke as if from a silver bell rang through the room; and soon music, soft and subdued, rose and fell with delicious entrancement, until listening time stood still, lost in a tangle of sweet sounds. And as Amerton, yet sitting in outward darkness, gazed into the luminous circle, he was conscious of the outline of a human figure standing in the light. Still staring in speechless awe, he saw the form gradually solidify, until there stood before him a man clad from head to foot in robes of white. His face was youthful and of exceeding beauty; his figure tall and of majestic mien; his eyes were as wells of light.

In obedience to a movement of his arm the outer darkness shrank back as night before dawn. And as the blackness vanished, so did all fear from Amerton's heart, and with a sense of confidence and happiness, he looked into the

face of the strange being. The music gradually ceased.

The same feeling of mystery, a like soothing sensation he had ever experienced when he believed some invisible presence near, now took possession of him. He was no longer awed or depressed, but calmed inexpressibly, fortified with mental strength, and filled with hope.

Coming closer to him with noiseless footfall, Amuni crossed his hands upon his breast in salutation, and in a voice sounding as from afar said:

“My son, though my form be strange to your sight, my presence is familiar, to your spirit. Long have I known you, frequently have I stood by your side.”

“Then it was you,” cried Amerton, “whose breath in the darkness of night I have felt upon my cheek, whose touch in hours of quiet assured me I was not alone.”

"Even so," replied Amuni.

"Then why have I not beheld you as I do now?"

"Because your spiritual sight was not opened."

"And you have known me from youth upwards."

"My knowledge of you extends through long ages before your present birth. In your last life, some hundreds of years ago, as men count time, you living in this country, were known to me as a student of occult lore. The world regarded you as an astrologer. The days upon which you had fallen were fraught with trouble for the land. Peering into the future, you had foretold the horrors of civil warfare, the violent death of your monarch, the exile and restoration of royalty. Many there were who believed, but more who ridiculed the science you professed. In your further

search into the mysteries of life and death, into the vast secrets of nature, I was appointed your master."

"Then have I learned knowledge from you?"

"Alas no," answered Amuni. "Had your spirit been as brave as your desires were strong, you had crossed the bridge parting mortals from immortals, and entered the golden gates of that land where wisdom shines as sunlight on the sea, and darkness dwells not."

"In what did I fail?"

"All students of occult lore must prove themselves worthy of the knowledge they seek. For every fresh revelation vouchsafed them new proof of moral strength is required. If absolute power over nature were given to those unworthy of trust, to those careless of using its force for good of humanity or sufficiently frail to apply it for evil, then

ruin and desolation would encompass the world. You, my son, were tried and found wanting. No second opportunity is given a student in a single life."

"Alas," Philip exclaimed, "how unhappy have I been!"

"In the fulness of time, death closed your bodily eyes. Even as consciousness is suspended in sleep to re-awake at dawn, so your spirit rested in the night-time of space to rise at the appointed hour and begin the new day of your present life. Because of the love I bore you in the past, I have striven to help you in your present incarnation."

"Master, friend," cried Amerton, extending his hands to grasp those of Amuni; but though he saw them meet those of the form before him, he was unconscious of touch. Involuntarily he shrank back.

Amuni smiled. "You see but the semblance of my body," he said, "which, now wrapped in trance, rests in a land far from here; this form you behold—like it in all things, possessing the same powers—is linked to its earthly counterpart by a vital chain, reuniting us at will."

"Those things you have spoken," said Amerton, "fill me with wonder, and account for much that heretofore perplexed me. In the recognition of strange places, familiarity with old-world events, acquirement of knowledge concerning things unstudied, consciousness of another existence has gleamed upon me, as lightning flashes revealing familiar landscapes to benighted travellers."

"Your spirit still retains its old yearning for mystic lore."

"Aye, helpless to restrain my cravings, I have desired knowledge with infinite

longing. Tell me," he continued, "shall it be granted me in this life?"

A sigh, weighted by grief, escaped Amuni's lips, and his eyes were suddenly clouded by sorrow.

"It depends on yourself," he answered: "Others may carry grapes to our lips, we alone can taste of them."

"I am ready to undergo the necessary test," said Amerton, feeling the throbbing of new strength within him.

"My son," replied Amuni gravely, and with volumes of melancholy in his tones, "the path you would tread is fraught with darkness and danger. In your onward course temptation will assail, grief will attend, and humiliation lie down with you; for 'tis only when we have sown in pain and sorrow we may reap in peace and joy."

Amerton's head sank upon his breast for his heart was sorely troubled.

“Seek not knowledge higher than you already possess,” said Amuni, “and your days will be filled with honour as a garden with flowers; your age crowned with peace as the hill-tops with snow. Thousands there are in this fair world of yours whose years are fraught with fear and pain, whose fate is barren hopes and broken hearts. These will be spared you if you seek not the higher path. But before your eyes behold the light of lore they must be washed with the brine of tears.”

“My master,” said the neophyte, “are mortals but the sport of fate, or are we most divinely ruled? In the tempest of thoughts whirling through my brain, I know not what to say, and only feel I must obey a will within me higher than my own; pain will seem as pleasure if it leads to the goal my soul seeks. Show me the path to tread, and

though sorrow clings to me and peace forsakes my heart, my feet shall be firm in the course they pursue, for I thirst for knowledge as parched grass for cooling rain, and long for repose as the hunted doe for rest."

"My son," replied Amuni, "you neither know the nature nor the extent of the ordeal you would embrace. Your heart must be withdrawn from the desires and attractions of the senses. Though you live in the world, all it holds dear must be rooted from your nature, aye, though your heart should bleed and your life lie in darkness. Not in the fleeting present but in the eternal future must you seek peace; earthly love must die in your heart, ambition hold no place in your mind. You must walk as a shadow amongst men, having no pleasure in aught they prize, no trust in those they honour, desiring only that lying

beyond you. You must save your life by sacrificing it; gain through loss; die to live."

As Amerton listened, his soul was troubled anew, for he thought of the woman he had made his wife, the life he had taken to his own. But Amuni, as if reading his mind, replied :

"You have married a wife and tasted the sacred joys of the household existence, even as did Gautama. But he, conquering nature, parted from her he loved with boundless ardour that he might embrace the holier life. The natural must be overcome that the eternal may be gained. By his passions is man chained to earth; by self-conquest is he raised to heaven. Had you no knowledge of domestic love, your sacrifice would have missed its most poignant pang. The student of occultism must lead a celibate life."

"Alas," said Amerton, "I am tortured to distraction; my soul is rent in twain. How can I part from her whom I have sworn to cherish and protect?"

"There is no need for parting," replied Amuni; "know you not there is a love higher than that founded on the senses."

Then there fell upon the room a silence as of death; the young man wrestled with his soul. Thick drops of perspiration oozing from his face and the quick drawing of his breath betrayed strong struggle. The climax of his fate had arrived; on his decision now must rest his future life. Eventually urged by an inner force he was incapable of withstanding, he flung himself upon his knees before Amuni and said:

"Be my master, I shall obey in all things; give me but the light I desire."

After a pause Amuni spoke to him:

“Your course will consist of no set ordeal, of no special task. Trial by fire and flame is but symbolic of the test by passion and pain. As only when man has conquered death he really lives, so is it when inclinations are subdued the soul reigns. Events will occur in your daily life that will search your spirit and wrestle with your strength. Submit yourself to the will of the All Merciful, embrace the sorrows sent you, accept the lessons taught you, despise not the humiliations visited on you. When triumph crowns you, shall you behold me again.”

With the index-finger of his right hand he pointed to a cross which two transverse lines had made on Amerton's left palm. When the latter raised his eyes from the sign, no trace of Amuni was visible. The great white light had vanished, the rays of the bronze lamp

burned dim, and with arms wide stretched and face turned towards the east, Benoni knelt in prayer, his head bowed low the while.

CHAPTER II.

THE STORY OF HER LIFE.

A FORTNIGHT after Ulic Tarbert had heard from Gal Alex the words which extinguished his hope, he received a brief note from her bidding him call in the afternoon. Since the night of the Keans' reception he had made no attempt to see her.

Young in years, quick to feel, impatient of pain, his disappointment deeply coloured his days. It seemed to him his future must remain a blank, that through all the years of his life he should be an observer of rather than a participator in joys common to humanity. Becoming suddenly weary of all that had previously given him pleasure, existence grew dis-

tasteful. Forgetful that the sphere in which each man lives, bounded by the narrow circumference of his own thoughts, feelings, experiences, is not the great world at large, he vaguely wondered why all things remained unchanged whilst his life had materially altered. He shrank from social crowds, avoided the companionship of his friends, worked harder than before, and passed most of his evenings alone, smoking and dreaming of what might have been, whilst day blended with night, and darkness, befitting the sombre complexion of his mind, crept across the world.

He had pondered continually over the words Gal Alex had spoken, wondering what was the mystery of her life, hoping he might be able to aid her in some way. Earnestly did he desire that circumstances would require him to make a great sacrifice for her sake. The days of knight-errantry are over, but human nature re-

mains ever the same, and he would gladly have engaged in combat and laid down his life for the lady of his heart.

Loving her exceedingly, doubt of her worth or honour never rose in his mind to impugn her fame or cool his ardour; for as fire and water, affection and suspicion have no common abiding-place. Sympathy for the sorrow clouding her increased his tenderness tenfold; for men love best natures which appeal to them most, so that in woman's weakness lies her strength.

He would have sought change by going out of town, but some fascination held him near her; and he regarded distraction from his thoughts as disloyalty to their object. Nor did he desire relief from his disappointment if likewise it lessened his attachment; he would not put love from him though it bore him sorrow. Through the potent power of this first affec-

tion all that was loyal and noble in his nature awoke; that which had lain dormant in his life became active. The influence of the feminine upon the male, exemplified in all the kingdoms of nature, finding uttermost expression in humanity, was here perceptible. This love had come to him as spring to the earth, apprising his heart of the wonderful possibilities it contained of happinesses yet unknown. And now, though he might not enjoy the fruits of summer, he would not endure the insensibility of winter.

It was morning when he received her note, and he impatiently awaited the hour at which he was bidden. The feelings and agitations crowded into this day would have sufficed for a year of his former existence. Counting time, not by calendar dates, but heart throbs, in the space of a few hours he lived a lifetime. But among the contending emo-

tions which stirred him, hope was found wanting.

Arriving at Gal Alex's house he was shown into the study, a little room looking on a trim garden, with rose-trees climbing round the casements. In this apartment she worked through the brightest hours of day. The walls were surrounded with bookshelves, on which her own novels, her favourite authors, and presentation copies of their works from contemporary writers were ranged like various companies of a common army.

On the topmost shelf stood terra cotta busts, framed photographs, china figures, Indian vases, and various objects of art. On the walls above these hung portraits of her more famous friends. The only furniture in the study consisted of wide armed easy chairs, a lounge, and a solid oak desk with many drawers, littered by papers and manuscripts.

Gal Alex was seated at this desk, which stood in the middle of the room, when Ulic entered. She rose to greet him with some constraint, but no lack of kindness in her manner, and then asking him to sit down, resumed her place.

From the position in which he stood the light fell full upon his face, and in a glance she read the change the past fortnight had wrought in him. Her first feeling was gratification that he had loved her well enough to feel so deeply; her second, sorrow and self-reproach that she had caused him pain. The latter emotion expressed itself in her voice as she said:

“Why have you not been to see me?”

“I waited,” he answered, “until you sent for me. Was it wrong?” he asked simply; “should I have come before?”

“I scarce know,” she replied gravely, leaning forward and resting her head upon one hand. “Since that night I have been

sadly confused, and until now could not speak of what is best for us."

That she had in thought joined his fate with hers, and in one word united herself with him, afforded him keen pleasure.

"But I have considered much," she continued, striving to speak calmly, lowering her eyes the while lest he might read all they expressed of pain and sorrow, "and concluded it was best I should ask you to come here and listen to the story of my life, then you will learn the cause which parts us."

He felt rather than perceived the struggle she made, and said, "If it distresses you, I had rather you left it untold. At least, don't tell me now; wait until another time, or write if it will save you pain."

"No, no, no," she replied sadly, "it had best be spoken to-day; we all have to face pain some time; if experience accustoms, I should be braver now."

She paused a couple of minutes, for the struggle was harder than she anticipated. His sympathy left him wordless because of its depth.

"I have done wrong," she said, "and I now shrink from my punishment in the loss of your regard. Seeing months ago you were growing to care for me, I should have spoken before, and saved you from suffering by checking your affection; but it's hard for a woman to speak on such a subject before a man's words have plainly paved her way; and, moreover, your affection became so much to me I could not put it from me if I tried; for you cannot conceive," she said, tears welling up from her heart, "the comfort and sweetness an honest man's love gives a lonely woman's life."

Her pale face was wet with tears.

He sprang from his chair, and seating himself at the opposite side of the desk

took one of her hands in both of his. Neither spoke for some time, but she by that one touch uniting them, understood all he would have said.

"Forgive me," she murmured, "I am weaker than I thought, but anxious days and sleepless nights have made me strangely nervous. From what I said you know," she added, anxious to finish her sentence, "or have suspected, I—I—am a wife."

The suspicion had risen in his mind and been promptly dismissed; now her words confirmed his surmise he started as if the idea occurred for the first time, and involuntarily removed his hand from hers. She glanced at him sorrowingly, then let her lids fall upon her burning cheeks.

"He is still living," said Ulic in a hard cold voice.

"He is still living," she repeated mechanically.

Her words were an impassable barrier shutting out hope, and filled with a sense of his own misery, he had no thought for her. But soon his better nature resuming its sway, some perception of the sufferings she must have endured flashed on him, and thinking of her grief he forgot his own. He thrust forward his hands to her once more, as if in this mute way he would express his deepest feelings for her wrongs, his perfect confidence in her honour.

“Your trouble,” he said huskily, “surely affords fresh claim to my affection. I would stand between you and all sorrow and misfortune; be to you more than all others, as you are more than all the world to me; and yet I know not what to say, only I would give my life to save you from pain.”

All traces of suffering vanished from her eyes; a glow of pleasure transfigured

her face, making her more youthful and beautiful than he had yet beheld her.

"Surely," she answered, "it is happiness enough for me to know I have so true a friend;" the shadows dwelling in her eyes departed from them.

The mental brightness surrounding and emanating from her pierced and dispelled the black weight of grief oppressing him, and for the first time during many days he felt comforted. For a while neither broke the spell felt equally by both; if only life were one prolonged period of these brief seconds, how happy could each have been. Sorrow, care, and uncertainty fell from them; the world they inhabited was solely bounded and influenced by their own feelings; one was in all things sufficient to the other. At last, as troubled thoughts of earth long left behind may cross the memory of the blest, so did recollections of her past history cloud

her present happiness; and with a sigh upon her lips she said :

“ Why is it, I wonder, youth is so often a period of bitter mistakes which later years in vain strive to repair? Filled with false trust in ourselves, sanguine because of our untried strength, we take steps which the efforts of time are unable to retrieve. No girl was happier than I during my early years. An orphan from childhood, I was reared by an aunt, who treated me as her daughter and regarded me as her heiress. Living in a quiet village on the Cornish coast, I was shut out from the world at large, and grew up wholly ignorant of its ways. I might never have known care or sorrow had I not one fatal hour met a man who possessed fascinations for me I was powerless to resist. From that day I lived. I was not wholly blind to the evil possibilities of his nature, which clearly pointed to

rocks on which a woman's happiness might readily be wrecked; but his profession as a clergyman seemed to my inexperienced eyes a guarantee for his better feelings, and woman-like I feared and loved the danger before me."

Ulic heard her with breathless attention.

"Knowing my aunt—who from the first had read him aright—would never consent to our union, he persuaded me to marry him privately, believing she might pardon me when our marriage was made known. In this he was mistaken. Heartily disliking the man, and aware his object was to gain her wealth through me, she expressed her displeasure by ignoring us. My husband soon moved to a more populous town, partly that I might be separated from the one friend and protector I had in the world, but principally that amongst a larger community he might enjoy greater liberty

of action. The knowledge of having wilfully deceived the kindest of relatives and best of women was a sorrow daily added to by a gradual perception that I had been wedded for sake of my expectations. The man to whom I had given the fulness of my girlish affections, soon wearied of a love he never valued and was incapable of returning."

She paused as if to gather strength, for there was that to come which gave her keener pain.

"I could have borne this," she continued, "but his scarce concealed profligacies revolted me. Henceforth my life with him became one scene of misery."

Again she hesitated, the colour flushing her cheeks, her breath coming hard and quick, her eyes avoiding the pitiful look of him to whom she bared the history of her life.

"By way of avenging his disappoint-

ment at receiving no portion with me," she went on, "he had recourse to a thousand petty tyrannies, and once when I resisted them he struck me to the ground. The blow killed the child I should have borne him."

Ulic clenched his right hand. "The brute," he exclaimed.

"Though painful for both of us, I must tell you all," she said, "that you may better understand my position. The bitterness which filled me, strengthened me to live through days of mental darkness. My heart froze, and all my love for him turned to loathing before a year of our wedded life had passed. He had rudely torn the mask from his character, and I saw how hopelessly irredeemable were his ways. To his other vices he added that of gambling. This passion led him from the card-table to the turf, which was finally the means of his ruin;

for, losing heavily, he had recourse to forgery, and being discovered, was convicted as a felon. This social catastrophe and bitter disgrace were welcome to me; not through a spirit of revenge, but from a sense of relief. The man who had wrecked my life because I loved him, was removed from me, and I was free from a foreboding of evil which had hung over me for months. I felt as if a weight had been lifted from my heart. Through this dreadful time I only recognized the fact of my freedom; and though I was severed from my youth by what seemed an existence of pain, some of its old brightness shone on me across the gulf parting my past and present. I should have been quite dependent on my own efforts for support had not my aunt taken me to her home. Leaving the country where my history was well-known, we severed ourselves from all

connection with its people, and settled in a quiet village in Surrey. I assumed my maiden name, and we took every precaution possible that my husband should not be able to trace us on his liberation.

“Did he strive to do so?” asked Ulic impatiently.

“I cannot say. In our new retreat we lived peaceably for years. So soon as the first sense of repose and relief had worn away, I felt perfect rest would henceforth become an impossibility to me. Like stains of blood on a murderer’s hand, invisible to all eyes but his, so the contamination of a past unknown to the world weighed heavily upon me. Ghosts of the miserable year which I thought had been safely laid to rest, haunted me. In hours of quiet, when the pulse of thought beat slow, dire and cruel remembrances of black and bitter days passed in shadowy procession before my mental sight.”

“Poor child!” he said.

“One day it occurred to me I could best rid myself of these spectres by exposing them to the light of public gaze; if shared with the world at large, my secret must cease to oppress my life. I would write it down. Selecting a plot admitting situations like those I had known, yet sufficiently removed from actual events to escape detection, I told the history of my life, reflecting in my pages, passions and miseries I had experienced. You may remember the result. The world never fails to recognize the genuine mark of nature in art. I became famous by a single book. Some faint cry from a lonely woman’s heart found answering echoes in the four quarters of the globe. In some mysterious way I touched hands with crowds and felt they were my kin.”

She was silent a minute as if review-

ing the past; Ulic did not disturb her.

"I had sheltered myself," she continued, "under the *nom de plume* of Gal Alex; but notwithstanding this a danger arose I had not foreseen, of my real name being discovered and my history revealed. The public is childishly curious regarding the private lives of those who amuse or instruct it; however, I managed to elude its inquiries until its first eagerness was gratified by a false and harmless sketch of my life invented by an ingenious editor of a society paper, and left uncontradicted by me. Naturally I shrank from publicity and coveted obscurity. Two years after the publication of my first novel, my aunt died, having settled on me all she possessed. The home in which she had been a familiar figure, brightening the dark places of my life, became henceforth un-

endurable. A solitary woman, I found the country depressing ; the attraction luring the moth towards flame brought me to the centre of art and letters."

"And you came to London?"

"Yes ; I fancied I could hide myself in this crowded city. At first, though surrounded by millions, my life was as solitary as when I had lived in a Surrey village. Having few sympathies with the public at large and no ties I lived for my work alone. My whole existence was bounded by the worlds I created and governed ; their denizens were my only friends ; but at times loneliness pressed heavily upon me and I longed with keen longing for companionship. Years spent in this self-elected solitude, during which I never touched the hand of a woman I trusted, never heard the sound of a voice I loved, strengthened my nature. The old sense of fear and

depression, sad results of a year of pain, gradually ceased to affect me. Moreover I had heard nothing of my husband since his conviction, and a hope that he would never again darken my life took possession of and filled me with courage. By degrees I allowed the strict seclusion long maintained to be intruded upon, and I entered society to receive a hearty welcome. Through my pages the world had come to know me, and its friendship dated back some years previous to our actual acquaintance. In the course of time men have asked my hand in marriage, but until I saw you, none had the power of awakening my love."

Ulic made a movement as if he would speak.

"I am coming to the end of my story," she said, placing her hand lightly on his arm, "let me finish. I speak plainly, for truth is ever best, and in-

deed concealment of my feelings from you would be impossible. Looking into my heart and seeing its affections had already escaped control, I became anxious and miserable; and as if my present happiness had touched some secret spring in the wonderful mechanism of nature, remembrances of my girlish love, with its tender awakening and bitter ending, came vividly back to me. A presentiment dwelt with me continually that fate, having given me some years of peace, was about to turn a new page in my life. Nor was I wrong."

She leaned back in her chair, her face expressing dejection, her attitude betraying weariness.

"You will perhaps remember," she said, "we two sat in an alcove one evening at Mrs. Netley's house."

"As if it were but yesterday," he replied.

"And as we talked Benoni entered the room."

"And came straight towards us."

"Yes. I had heard of the wonderful power he possessed of reading the lives of those with whom he came in contact, and being naturally credulous regarding things supernatural, I believed the statements made and shrank from his observation."

"Yes," said Ulic eagerly.

"Nervous from fear and anxious to ascertain if his powers were such as had been stated, I asked him for a flower."

"And he produced a tulip or picked up one we had not noticed before."

"He did more than that."

"More?"

"As I glanced at the flower I saw it contained a note. This I concealed until I was alone. Here it is," she added, opening a little drawer and producing a

slip of foreign note-paper, which she handed to Ulic, who read the following words: "Take courage. The day shall be when love will reign in your heart as a moon in heaven calming a troubled sea. In doubt or danger send for me. I would serve you."

"I pondered over these words night and day," she continued, "for they comforted me exceedingly. I no longer doubted or distrusted him; this bit of paper and the knowledge it seemed to convey of my past served as a bond between us. Three days before that on which you asked me to be your wife, I sent for him. It had occurred to me that perhaps my husband no longer lived, and that even whilst I considered myself bound to him I was really a free woman. This idea, begotten of hope, could not readily be suppressed. I dared not make inquiries of the prison officials,

and I knew none whom I could trust save you, whom I shrank from employing on such an errand. Therefore I requested Benoni to call on me. Finding he was not only aware of the principal acts but of the minute details of my life, I asked if my husband still lived. This he was unable to say at the time, but promised he would ascertain for me in a couple of days. I asked him to call on me one evening, at a time when I believed I should be alone; he selected that on which you spoke to me. You met him as you left the house."

"What did he say?" Ulic asked anxiously.

She bowed her head and her words came slow.

"That he was not only alive, but near me."

Ulic uttered a moan, but did not venture to speak for some seconds. Then

he said, almost in a whisper, "Perhaps it is false; I shall make inquiries to-morrow."

"It is true," she said decisively.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I have seen him."

"Here?"

"No, not here, thank God. A few minutes after you, on the night of the Keans' reception, had seen me to my brougham it was blocked for a moment at the corner of the street. As I looked up to see the cause, a face was thrust against the window, and in a second I recognized—my husband."

"Good heavens!" cried Tarbert.

During the short silence which ensued he strove to devise some means by which he could protect the woman he loved from the possible annoyance or exposure this liberated felon might attempt, but none presented themselves to his troubled mind.

“And now,” she said, nerving herself for a great effort, “forget you have ever spoken to me of your love; forget that you would have made me your wife.”

“You are cruel,” he said reproachfully.

“Only to be kind. Believe me it will be best. You are a man and love is not to you what it is to me. In a little while you will live down the disappointment felt at present; I will fade from your memory. Aye, it is best and wisest, no doubt, it should be so. It may be,” she added, with a struggle for utterance, “another woman happier than I can ever be, may win the love I am powerless to accept; if so, dear friend——”

She broke down, and hid her face that he might not see her bitter tears.

“I shall never leave you, never forget you,” he said.

She lifted her head and smiled sadly.

"Never," she replied, "is a long time, and the changes years bring are many."

"You doubt me?" he said.

"Not your present feelings. But why should you devote the best period of your life to me? Whilst that man exists we can never be more to each other than we are to-day; he may live as long as you, or longer than I. What I am going to say may be cruel, but is certainly true. You have seen a roller pass over a field; the ground which before was rough, is then levelled. The roller typifies time, levelling, not mounds, but subduing hearts. Leave me now, leave England; in a few years you will forget me, and some good woman will one day thank heaven for your love, even as I would have done could it have been lawfully mine."

He listened to her with a sinking heart, and gazed at her with reproachful eyes.

“This,” he said, “is your affection for me; you cannot love me or you would never speak such words.”

She strove to answer him, but failed. The struggle was again too strong for her, and once more she buried her head in her hands and cried as if her heart would break. It is bitter pain to see those we love suffer, whilst we look on powerless to aid.

“Poor child!” he said, writhing in his chair and knowing not what to say.

If she heard him she made no sign. A storm of tears, violent from suppression, shook her frame; her choking sobs alone broke the silence of the room. When her passion had almost exhausted itself he spoke to her.

“You did not mean to send me away?” he said.

“I did; it will be for your good.”

“It might also be for my evil. Would

it cause you pain if you were never to see me again?"

"Ah, you know it would; but I should strive to find comfort in thinking I had advised you for the best."

"And you would forget me?"

"God knows I never could."

"Then why ask me to forget you? Do you fancy your love for me is stronger than mine for you; that I could find peace or happiness wholly separated from you?"

"A woman's love is ever stronger than a man's; to her it is a principle of her life, to him an incident in his career."

"This is not true of all women nor of all men. It is not true of me. My affection for you is the keystone of my existence; take it away and my whole life falls to ruin. No, we must not part. You say we cannot be more than friends, then let us be friends indeed.

There have been and are yet friendships existing between men and women more pure from their unselfishness, more noble from their disinterestedness than any other tie. The world, because of its inherent evil, neither understands nor appreciates such bonds; but need you care for its malice if your own heart acquits of wrong? I shall ask no more than to stand first in your love, that you may feel in this wide world you are not alone, that the strength of a heart loving you full well is yours to lean upon in trial and trouble. And if the sad tangle of your life is finally righted, then will I claim my reward; if not, we may be united eternally in another world, more merciful than this has been."

"And would you," she asked, love and admiration blended in her eyes, expressed in her voice—"would you wait for me all these years?"

"Aye, I would wait for you to the last day of my life."

"Surely," she said, "this is rare and perfect love, the highest man can know or woman inspire." Her face glowed with happiness and gratitude.

"You accept me as your friend?" he asked.

She gave him her hand, which he raised to his lips, and the bond between them was sealed.

"And now," he said, "that I am your counsellor in all things, let me enter at once upon the duties of my office. This man having discovered you, there is no knowing what tactics he may employ to distress or humiliate you. Let me guard and direct your life."

"You must not take my troubles upon yourself."

"This after all I have told you," he said reproachfully.

“Dear friend, may God bless you.”

The words had scarce been uttered when both heard the bell ring through the house in a long-sustained peal. A moment later a servant knocked at the door, and entered the room bearing a note on a salver. Gal Alex opened it and read the single line it contained, “I want to see you—Amos Berkeley.” Her colour went and her hands trembled.

“Where is the bearer?” she asked.

“In the hall, ma’am.”

“Let him remain there at present. Go into the dining-room whilst I write a reply, and come for it when I ring.”

The servant quietly disappeared.

Gal Alex looked at Ulic. “Amos Berkeley,” she said, “has come to see me.”

“Who is he?”

“My husband,” she answered.

CHAPTER III.

TRIUMPH AND TEMPTATION.

DURING the early hours of the day on which Ulic Tarbert called on Gal Alex, Mrs. Netley sat in the morning room of her house at Palace Gardens. It was yet too early for lunch, a fact accounting to some extent for the expression of dissatisfaction her homely features bore. Certainly to her, as to others, the world looked brighter after luncheon, and far happier yet when dinner was a thing of the past. It is instructive to consider how hope rises as appetite is satiated; how peace with oneself and mankind is attained by an excellent meal.

The thoughts ruffling the serenity of Mrs. Netley's mind just now were such

as the most dainty banquet could not permanently banish. Foremost amongst her grievances was the fact she yet remained a commoner, and Lord Pompey was still unwed. For three years she had devoted her energies to persuading him heaven had destined her for his bride; and fearing he put more faith in judgments formulated on earth, she had striven to convince the world of her suitability for the desired position.

Mrs. Netley was aware that morally he was a *roué*, physically a wreck, intellectually a fool; but she likewise knew he was brother of a duke, and in true British spirit she prostrated herself before nobility—not of nature, which is merely God's handiwork, but of rank, which is of man's creation. To unite herself with the family of a peer; to have her alliance recorded in Debrett and Burke, was the highest ambition to which her

feeble soul aspired. Having attained the title of courtesy which marriage with Lord Pompey would secure, she could die happily and pass into another sphere as a woman of distinction. Or, on the other hand, if the years of Lord Pompey's married life were few, grief would not rend her heart, and consolation for his absence would remain to her in belief he had gone to a world where consideration due to his rank would temper the treatment he received.

He had accepted her blandishments with charming courtesy, had smiled graciously at her wiles, continually availed himself of her hospitality, but had not offered to make her his wife. He had fluttered airily gracefully and brightly around her, but when she had sought to capture him he had tantalisingly flown away; an action which occasioned her vexation of spirit.

This conduct on Lord Pompey's part was caused by the remembrance of his brother, the sixteenth Duke of Bloomsbury, a shrivelled old mummy with a wig, a prominent nose, and red eye-lids, who entertained the uttermost respect and admiration for himself as head of his illustrious house.

The anniversary of the day it had pleased heaven to send him on earth, he invariably celebrated by clothing himself in the tarnished splendour of a court suit, wearing the garter on his shrivelled knee, and the blue ribbon of the order, somewhat besmeared with snuff, across his shrunken breast. The sight of such pomp and state had due effect upon a circle of poor relations bidden to celebrate this annual festivity, as likewise upon Lord Pompey's somewhat feeble mind.

Now the latter had once outraged his

noble family by marriage with a player; and when the catastrophe came which left him penniless, or, in the words of his counsel pleading for divorce, "ruined the happiness of his life," he was only taken back to his own on condition that he never contracted a second alliance without gaining the consent of the head of his house. Lord Pompey had always stood in reverent awe of his ducal brother, and notwithstanding the financial advantages a union with Mrs. Netley would insure, felt reluctant to introduce into the family circle a lady whose antecedents were said to have been connected with pork.

For three years Mrs. Netley had wooed Lord Pompey, and now concluded if he remained indifferent to her wishes, she would devote her energies to some more hopeful object. A woman of clear judgment and keen foresight, she had con-

ceived a plan she trusted would decide her fate regarding him. She resolved on asking him to luncheon, and the repast being finished, announcing her intention of going abroad and remaining there an indefinite period. If ever he intended making her his wife, he would then, she argued, when there was a possibility of her being lost to him for ever, declare his intentions. If he remained silent she would draw her own conclusions, and, journeying to the continent, seek there the distinction her country refused.

In France and Italy, she understood, titles were easily purchased; invariably creatures with waxed moustaches were attached to them, who frequently became hindrances to domestic bliss; but the matrimonial lottery was all chance and no certainty. Foreign titles, she reflected, had an imposing sound, though English people

sneered at them as being frequently associated with charlatans or bankrupts. Her wealth, she felt confident, would win the regard and envy of a nobility whose purses were as light as their pedigrees were long; and no doubt some poor prince, a noble creature with a haughty mien, the inheritor of a historic name and a ruined palace by a lake, in which he never bathed, would offer her his heart for a certain consideration. What would it matter were he a pagan, or even a papist, if she could boast of the blood-stained traditions of her house? What would she care even if the last penny of her fortune was swallowed by his debts, and she was compelled to live on macaroni and Parmesan cheese for the remainder of her life, so long as she was a Marquese del Malachite or a Princess de Paladin? As Richard the Third offered his kingdom for a horse, so

was she willing to give her fortune for a title.

Thinking over her foreign prospects for a time reduced her anxiety concerning Lord Pompey. He was not in himself romantic; his title was one of courtesy, and the ravages of time were perceptible in his appearance on days when his valet was careless. But then he belonged to a ducal family, and English dukes, no matter how ignoble their origin, were regarded by all mortals who were not low radicals with fear and trembling. She would feel happier in marrying Lord Pompey than in facing the uncertainties of a foreign market. To-day must certainly decide her actions; by his manner would she shape her future course.

A secondary cause for the gravity expressed in her broad features was the result of her niece's marriage. Miriam had wed the man of her choice, but

Mrs. Netley's common sense enabled her to see this union, like so many marriages made for love, had not resulted in happiness.

Philip Amerton was in all seeming an excellent husband, and his wife made no complaint, but there existed between them a lack of sympathy, less difficult to perceive than explain. Mrs. Netley might have accepted this as the usual result of matrimony, but it grieved her not a little that since his union Philip gradually shrank from society and had failed to introduce his wife to personages of light and leading amongst whom he was a familiar spirit. This Mrs. Netley on behalf of her niece resented.

She had always considered Philip eccentric, but since his marriage, and especially within the last three months, his constant abstraction, seeming depression, and visible weariness struck her as being

decidedly odd, and utterly unbecoming in a newly-married man. Between him and Mrs. Netley thorough friendship had never existed ; now Philip avoided her whenever it was possible to do so without rudeness. To-day she had asked him and his wife to luncheon, but as usual, he had refused, and by way of filling his place Mrs. Netley had bidden Colonel Tarbert, he being the first person whose name arose in her memory. That there was danger in bringing him and her niece together somewhat frequently, as she had of late, never occurred to her unsuspicious mind ; for assuredly she considered, if a girl had declined a man's affections whilst she was free to accept them, she would feel less inclined to receive when bound to reject them. Not being a philosopher, Mrs. Netley was unaware that what we regard with indifference when within our grasp, assumes

inordinate allurements and disproportionate value once beyond our reach. In fact, for many months past her thoughts being wholly centred on Lord Pompey to the exclusion of all other interests, she did not therefore perceive that between Colonel Tarbert and Mrs. Amerton an intimacy had sprung up which afforded gossip to the town.

Mrs. Netley was still busy with her schemes regarding Lord Pompey when Miriam entered. Seating herself in a low chair beside her aunt she said :

“Philip could not come to-day, as he wrote to tell you.”

“Humph,” said Mrs. Netley, tossing back her head impatiently.

“He said I was to plead his excuses ; he is very busy just now.”

“That’s what he always says.”

“He has signed an agreement to write a story for the ‘Washington Magazine,’

and is behindhand with the greater portion of it; he says he will never again undertake to write a serial unless he can place the completed manuscript in the editor's hands before a chapter of it is printed. I heartily wish this was finished."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Netley, scanning her niece's face, and noting it had lost much of its usual brightness.

"Well, he works too hard, and then becomes terribly irritable; the slightest thing upsets him."

"But he doesn't visit his temper upon you, I hope, dear; that's a thing a young wife should put down at once or her future life may become a martyrdom."

"It is not temper," replied the younger woman, "he never complains, nor has he ever used a harsh word to me; it might be easier to bear if he would, only he becomes restless, looks worn, and grows tired of all things."

"He wants change; you must make him go abroad for a few weeks."

"I'm afraid he wouldn't take my advice on that subject; you see it would interfere with his work, and I fancy he lives for that alone," she concluded with an air of sadness.

"Nonsense, child, I'm sure he's fond of you; but young wives are always jealous of whatever occupies their husbands' time. Would you have him tied to your apron-string all day long?"

Mrs. Amerton neither smiled nor replied; it was doubtful if she heard the last remark. After a few seconds spent in abstraction or deliberation she said:

"Do you know, I fear I have never understood him, and that I am unsuited to be his wife. He should have married some clever woman who would have helped him in his work, and been more a companion than I can ever be to him."

"You mustn't think that, child. A clever man shouldn't marry a fool, but he certainly shouldn't wed a woman as wise as himself, or they would hate each other in a month. No, my dear, your husband is somewhat eccentric—most authors are I have heard, and indeed they have always seemed odd to me—but you will come to understand his ways in the course of a little time, and settle down as happily as most husbands and wives."

"Do you really think so?" she asked, as if such a probability seemed most uncertain to her.

"I'm certain of it."

"Do you know—" Miriam began, and then paused abruptly, adding after a slight pause, "I doubt if I had better tell you."

"I am so much older, my dear, and my advice may be able to help you," re-

plied the matron, who if somewhat foolish regarding the one ambition of her life, was kindly and sensible when confronted with other subjects.

“Well, I scarce like to admit it even to myself,” said the young wife, “but I fear Philip doesn’t love me.”

“If not, he would never have married you.”

“He may have wed me because of some passing fancy, which has worn itself out in a few months.”

Mrs. Netley smiled complacently before answering. “That is what all young wives think. They expect a man to keep at the honeymoon fever-heat of devotion all his life; and when he sobers down to every-day affection, they imagine he no longer cares for them. It is not in human nature that a man should continue violently in love with his wife after the first six months of wedded life. My dear, be

rational, and take the world as it comes and humanity as it is, and make the best of them."

"Ah," replied the younger woman, "you don't understand."

"Of course not; when two persons don't agree to think alike on a common subject, one always believes the other doesn't understand. But of one thing rest assured, Philip is very fond of you."

If Mrs. Amerton believed her aunt, the words brought no consolation in their train; no gleam of satisfaction lit her face. Perceiving this, Mrs. Netley like many others, became the more anxious to convince, because having little faith in her assertions.

"Besides," she said, "literary men of all others must live so much to themselves and in the world they create, not merely when engaged upon the mere mechanical labour of writing, but whilst

21—2

thinking of their characters and weaving their plots; and if they are silent and absorbed, a wife may naturally think herself neglected. With painters it is different; they talk whilst they work, and can judge of effects when colours are on the canvas. But an author must gauge his labour mentally, and the full effort of his mind must be devoted to his task."

Still Mrs. Amerton remained unsatisfied with her aunt's explanations; womanlike she would not be persuaded against her will. She remained silent for some time, looking straight before her the while, then, as if continuing a train of thought, said:

"If it were not for Benoni, I fancy Philip would not be as he is; but the mystic is continually with him, and after his visits, Philip seems to shrink from me as if I burdened his life. This man has some influence over him I dread without understanding."

“Dear child,” replied the matron, anxious to comfort her niece, “mysticism is but a passing craze from which he will recover in a few months. It’s the fashion to-day; a couple of years ago it was æstheticism, now it is occultism; next year it will be some other ism, for men and women are but grown children, and must have toys to play with and keep them amused.”

“If I thought it was merely a passing fancy of his, I would——” she stopped suddenly and then began a fresh sentence: “What you say may be true regarding the world, but concerning Philip, I believe it is different. With him mysticism is no craze, but part of his life, and I feel sure he will never change.”

Before Mrs. Netley could reply, the door opened and Colonel Tarbert was announced. Miriam had not known he would be present, and her first feeling

of surprise was succeeded by one of pleasure. His heavy-lidded eyes glittered as they fell upon her, and the smile of self-satisfaction usually lingering in the lines round his mouth, broadened perceptibly. He was soon seated between Mrs. Netley and Miriam, talking volubly on topics of the day.

Presently Lord Pompey came tripping into the room, smiling joyously as if he and all the world were young. His tall figure was carefully packed in faultlessly-fitting clothes; his auburn hair was beautiful to behold; his cheeks glowed with a colour representative of rude health and happy youth.

Luncheon was soon announced, but before entering the dining-room, Mrs. Netley found an opportunity of saying to her niece:

“My dear, I want to have a few minutes’ private conversation with dear

Lord Pompey after lunch; you will see that I have an opportunity. Afterwards I may have something to communicate to you," she added, with a smile conveying volumes of meaning.

The luncheon was veritably a dainty banquet — light, appetising, delicate, exhilarating. The dishes which continual experience had taught Mrs. Netley Lord Pompey best appreciated were set before him. He toyed with truffles, tasted ortolans, drank claret of a famous vintage, and champagne which had come from an imperial cellar. He enjoyed himself to the full, as did Colonel Tarbert likewise; but their companions being anxious, by no means participated in their satisfaction.

"Every one is talking of your husband's article on 'Modern Mysticism' in the 'Nineteenth Century,'" said Colonel Tarbert to Mrs. Amerton.

"I must say I don't understand it," remarked Lord Pompey.

"I can quite believe that," answered the colonel, emphatically.

"Eh," said Lord Pompey, "wonder what he means?"

"Mysticism, you see, is not meant to be understood."

"You sometimes read, Lord Pompey?" asked Mrs. Amerton.

"Yes, frequently — when I want to sleep."

"Then what form of literature do you select — newspapers?"

"No, I never read daily papers; it is quite a waste of time. I did once, but the effect was unpleasant; their eternal politics, vulgar tragedies, and sensational leaders got mixed in my dreams."

"You should read shilling novels."

"Wonder," he soliloquized, "if she writes them. All women do nowadays;

must ask her—hem.” Then he said aloud, whilst a faded simper spread itself across the bright colours of his complexion, “Do you, my dear young lady, write books?”

“No,” she replied, “I’m not clever enough.”

“Alphonse Karr says,” Colonel Tarbert remarked, “a woman who writes, commits two sins—she increases the number of books, and decreases the number of women.”

“He was a foreigner,” Mrs. Netley said.

“And, by gad, a gallant man,” added Lord Pompey.

“Certainly a wise one,” said the colonel.

“If some of our friends heard you they would not be pleased.”

“Perhaps not,” replied the colonel. “A couple of generations ago every woman believed she was sent into the world for a husband ; but now the majority are convinced their mission is to write ; and since the days of Charlotte Brontë, every

rectory sends forth its volumes yearly, yet no second 'Jane Eyre' has appeared."

"You agree with Alphonse Karr?" asked Mrs. Netley.

"Thoroughly."

"And think women were sent into existence——"

"Merely to mate with man."

Mrs. Netley rose ; they all entered an adjoining sitting-room. The hostess seated herself on a sofa, leaving room for a second person. A low fire burned on the hearth close by ; she took up a hand-screen to shield her face from observation and protect her eyes from the blaze. Lord Pompey followed and sat down beside her, whilst Mrs. Amerton and Colonel Tarbert, having lingered for a while over an etching of Andrea Mantegna's Dance of Nymphs, withdrew into a smaller drawing-room.

"Charming woman," said Lord Pompey

from his corner of the sofa; "figure portly and not ungraceful; hands and face a trifle coarse, but then not bad style in all; and what a delightful hostess," he added, observing her critically, and shaking his head into which the champagne had flown.

"Lord Pompey," said his companion severely, because displeased with his audible remarks, "I have come to a decision this week, which as an old friend, I must tell you."

"Thank you," he replied, with a simper, adding in an aside, "Wonder what the deuce is coming."

"I am about to leave England."

"To leave England," he echoed in genuine surprise, for such a possibility had never occurred to him. "For long?" he asked.

"It may be for years," she answered pathetically.

"Deuce take it, she doesn't want to marry me after all," he said *sotto voce*, feeling hurt because of her want of taste or lack of enterprise, but appreciating her all the more.

"You see," she added, stimulated by success to continue her part, "I can readily let my house, and my niece being married I have no ties binding me to England."

"Didn't think I'd lose her like this," he muttered; then added in a louder key, "Where are you going?"

"To Italy," she answered.

"Some foreign adventurer will marry her," he considered aloud, "some fellow with a tenor voice, a guitar, and a romantic name; they are always waiting for English widows or American heiresses."

"Of course," Mrs. Netley remarked, with a touch of pathos in her voice, "it will be quite a wrench to part from many

friends, and—and from you in particular, dear Lord Pompey.”

“Dear lady,” he said; then speaking to himself added, “Gad, she’s in love with me after all—clever woman—excellent taste, egad.”

Mrs. Netley waited, played with her hand-screen, and then threw down her trump card. “No matter,” she said, “where I am, by whom I may be surrounded, I shall think of you, and ever dear Lord Pompey, with tenderness.”

She laid the hand nearest him on the sofa, perceiving which he immediately seized it in both his own.

“Gad,” he soliloquized audibly, “I have a mind to risk it: if she goes away I may never see her again, women are capricious; but the Married Women’s Property Act plays the deuce with a fellow though. I’ll get her to make a settlement on me.”

"And if," said Mrs. Netley with a sigh, "we should never meet again—you, dear Lord Pompey, will think of me—sometimes?"

"I shall think of you for ever. You are awfully good, you know."

"How you flatter me."

"Yes, I always flatter women; gad they like it; deuce take them if they don't. But must you really go?"

"It is best I should."

"Then," he said, "I'll go with you."

Mrs. Netley's heart sank; she was not quite certain of his meaning.

"Lord Pompey," she replied gravely, "that cannot be. What would the world say?"

"I mean, don't you know, go with you as your husband."

He took her hand and glued his lips to it for a second. A sense of triumph suddenly filled Mrs. Netley's heart; a

broad smile of satisfaction beamed across her massive face, the hour long hoped for had come at last. Her loathsome association with pork in the past would be merged for ever and forgotten in her marriage with a member of a ducal house. Oh, day of tardy approach! Oh, hour of perfect satisfaction! That for which she had struggled long and striven greatly was at hand, and joy rose in her breast as a sun o'er the land, for the dawn of her life had awakened and the world was glad.

"Then," she said softly, "you really love me so much?"

"More, far more," he replied, coming closer to her and putting his arm around her ample waist.

"Ah," she exclaimed drawing nearer to him, "I cannot resist you."

"No," he answered, "they never could. They say," he added in a minor tone,

"she has a deuced lot of money;" then aloud, "You have plenty of—— no, that's not what I mean; deuced bad memory—oh yes—I was about to say I was fond of you—very—and all that sort of thing."

"You have long since gained my heart; believe me I am wholly yours."

"Yes, so you are," he replied, supporting her head on his padded breast.

"His manners are so distinguished," she reflected, "no vulgar demonstration, perfect self-possession, natural elegance."

"We will go abroad," he said, "after our marriage."

"You can name our wedding day."

"Egad, let it be to-morrow if you like."

"No, no," she said impressively; "no indecent haste. There will be settlements to make"—Lord Pompey smiled—"and you will present me to your family——"
Lord Pompey frowned.

"Yes, yes," he replied, in tones that struck his hearer as being without gladness.

"And now," said Mrs. Netley, "let us seek my niece that we may communicate the news at once."

When Mrs. Amerton and Colonel Tarbert had passed into the smaller drawing room some sense of reserve and distrust of her strength helped to render her nervous and ill at ease. For the influence which this man's presence had of old exercised over her returned in full force; now she had pledged her faith to another its existence became more harmful than before, and fraught with danger she shrank from contemplating.

In quiet hours the question had risen in her mind whether after all she had been wise in refusing to accept Colonel Tarbert as her husband. Philip was a dreamer amongst men, a man of lofty

ideals and keen sensibilities, to whose mental height it gradually broke upon her she could never rise. With Colonel Tarbert she was already on a common plane. There was that in his nature which appealed to hers but made her not a better woman.

Awaking to the knowledge she was Philip Amerton's wife, she had striven to put such thoughts from her; yet stealthily as an enemy upon his unguarded victim, they had returned again and again, and would not be kept at bay. Colonel Tarbert, who had come to occupy much of her mental life, was constantly in her presence. Philip seldom accompanied her when she visited, yet believing it pleased her, was anxious she should maintain acquaintance with the world of Kensington at large. With most of her friends Colonel Tarbert was likewise intimate, and therefore continually met her at their homes.

And in some way, though she was unaware of the fact, it had come to be recognized that when he appeared all other friends of Mrs. Amerton gave him place, and left him to the enjoyment of undisturbed conversation with her. Though she looked forward to these meetings with pleasure, she had never sought to bring them about, and therefore shrank from considering them disloyalty to her husband.

Colonel Tarbert's influence stole over her so gradually that she remained ignorant of its progress, and would only wake to its existence to discover its strength. For in no way had he sought to disturb the serenity of their intercourse by forcing it to deeper and more dangerous feelings. Calculating even in his passions, he had resolved to gain her love, for its own sake, and at the same time avenge himself upon his rival. It had given him a fiendish delight to find the man whom he sought to wrong

unconsciously aiding him in his malicious efforts. Closely observing this woman whom he loved as well as it was possible for one of his nature to love, he became aware Amerton's affection for her had abated, and though this deprived Tarbert of one sting, enough would be left in the outrage he meditated against Amerton's honour. Philip and he had seldom encountered since the former had returned to England, but when they did the husband's intuition made him shrink from the man who met him with fair words and kindly smiles.

Had Miriam foreseen she would have been forced by circumstances to an uninterrupted conversation with Colonel Tarbert, she would have avoided the occasion. Now she could not escape she sought to overcome the nervousness and dread of she knew not what that seized possession of her.

"It is such a long time since we met," said the colonel, "I began to wonder when I should see you again."

"Long time," she replied. "Why, it's only four days."

"But four days are four ages to me."

She felt his eyes were fixed upon her, and she looked straight ahead not venturing to meet his gaze.

"Are you not going abroad this winter?" she asked somewhat abruptly, hoping yet fearing she might receive an affirmative answer to her inquiry.

"I don't know;" he said, "it depends on circumstances." A sneer spread itself across his face. "You see," he continued, "my brother who has been long an invalid, is very bad just now, and it might be wiser for me to stay."

"You would," she said, scarce heeding her words, but anxious they should divert him from the channel into which she felt

his thoughts had turned—"you would feel sorry if anything happened to him."

"Sorry to come into a title and an unencumbered estate ;" he replied laughingly. "Oh, very I assure you." Then seeing his merriment jarred upon her he added, "Of course I should regret poor Kerry, but then he has never enjoyed life—at least after my fashion."

"But he may have after his own."

"Deuced slow I should think: the best of his days have been spent amongst dry and dusty books, a heartless, bloodless company at best. Give me life in the full current of enjoyment, even if it lasts but a year; wine that enriches the blood, adventures that quicken the heart, women whose smiles are as sunshine to existence."

"You forget yourself," she said, striving to seem severe.

"No, no, but I remember you."

"Colonel Tarbert," she replied, her heart beating rapidly.

"Nay, don't be angry with me. Do you remember," he continued, "that only eighteen months ago I asked you to marry me? Since then I have felt miserable, thinking of you as the wife of another man, for I have never ceased to love you."

His words fell on her ears with a sense of gladness for which her heart smote her. "You must not say that," she said almost in a whisper.

"Why not?"

"Because we cannot undo the past, even if we would."

"That is sheer nonsense. Must you be tied for ever to the word you uttered in mistake? Must your whole life be ruined because of a promise given in error?"

"No, no," she cried scarce knowing

what to answer in the confusion of her thoughts, "not given in error."

"But I say it was," he said, growing bolder from seeing her deliberate. "You didn't know then the man you accepted as your husband would become a fanatic—little better than a lunatic—the dupe of an Eastern juggler."

"This is not true," she replied, feeling the while his words echoed her thoughts.

"It is true, and you know it well; all the world talks of and laughs at him as a madman."

"How dare you say this to me?" she answered, still struggling with herself.

But all effort to hide the inward strife besetting her was vain; seeing which, a gleam of triumph shone balefully in her companion's eyes, an evil smile deepened the lines round his mouth. His opportunity had come, and he seized it readily.

"Now listen to me," he said in quiet tones. "What I am going to say may be hard for you to hear, but may help you to happiness eventually. You are only in Amerton's way; he has become an ascetic, and you are but a millstone round his neck. If it weren't for you he would quit London, go to India, become an adept or some other kind of lunatic, and be happy after his own fashion; but weighted with you, he can do nothing."

She was powerless to reply; feeling what the tempter said was true, she did not dare contradict him.

"Leave him," said the colonel, bending down his head until his face almost touched hers—"leave him and come with me. You know I have always loved you, and I feel sure you care for me. Let us go abroad, and when your husband has obtained a divorce I swear I shall make you my wife."

She was silent. The struggle within was great; all that was good and bad in her nature waged a warfare, in which one would be slain for ever, and meanwhile she stood by as a trembling spectator, conscious how much depended on the victor.

“Won’t you come with me?” he whispered, and then more determinedly continued, “By heavens, you shall. Why waste your life with this shadow of a man? For your own sake, for mine, aye for his, if you still care for him, come with me. In some quiet corner of Europe we will forget the past, and you will begin existence afresh with me. You shall be the happiest woman living; only tell me you will come.”

He flung all the strength of his desires into his words, but yet she wavered and made no reply. He smothered a curse rising to his lips and cried out, “You

are cold as a statue; have you no heart?"

"I am wicked," she replied in a low voice, "to let you say such words to me, and yet——"

He waited anxiously, but she did not continue.

"Would it not be more wicked to blight your whole life by refusing this certain happiness? Only say you will come."

"Not now, not now," she gasped. "Your words have bewildered me; my brain is on fire, and I know not what I say."

"You shall answer me now or never," he replied, seeing her weakness was his opportunity. "Say yes, and I am your slave for life; say no, and you shall never see me again."

"Ah," she said, "you are cruel; you torture me, and yet you have no mercy."

"Love is ever cruel. Only answer me and your torture ends. Shall I be yours, or do we indeed part?"

Before she had time to reply Mrs. Netley's voice was heard in the next room.

"Answer me at once, yes or no," the tempter said imperatively.

"No," she said falteringly; then added, "Thank God, I'm saved."

Colonel Tarbert muttered curses, but before he had time to speak, Mrs. Netley appeared.

"My dear," she said, in her own joy not heeding her niece's confusion, "you and Colonel Tarbert also must hear the news. Dear Lord Pompey has at length persuaded me to become his wife."

CHAPTER IV.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

THE surprise which Ulic Tarbert and Gal Alex felt at the sudden mention of Amos Berkeley's name was great. Neither spoke for a while; but in their interchanged glances she read the pity he expressed for her, he the trustfulness she felt in him.

"What am I to do?" she asked.

"You must see him," he replied.

She shrank back as if the suggestion was not only unwelcome but unexpected.

"It is best," Ulic continued, "to discover what steps he means to take, and see how he will behave, that you may gauge his intentions towards you. Dismiss him and you are left in suspense

regarding his movements, and open to be molested by him at the first opportunity."

"I had not thought of that."

"Before he enters I shall step out of the room on to the lawn here; it may be as well I should know him, and you may feel greater security in the assurance that I am at hand."

"You are indeed a valuable friend," she answered; "it will give me courage and strength to feel you are near."

"Let me advise you. From what I can learn of this man he is a coward and therefore a bully. Don't let him see you fear him; refuse his demands if they are extortionate, for I have no doubt he comes for money; don't offer to buy his silence or he will haunt you; but promise him a small annuity on condition that he troubles you no more. Now summon the servant, say you have

changed your mind and will see him ;” and he touched the bell.

When the maid appeared, Gal Alex asked, “Did you say I had a visitor?”

“No ma’am, I said you were busy.”

“Tell the bearer of the note I can spare him five minutes, and show him in here.”

The interval between the servant’s exit and the arrival of this unwelcome visitor seemed an age of pain, broken by one interval of hope when Ulic Tarbert, before leaving the room, had taken her hand for a second and whispered one word, “courage,” in her ear. At last the door opened ; she neither turned nor looked, but kept her eyes steadily fixed on some papers before her. At length she suddenly raised them and found herself alone with her husband. He was standing near the closed door carefully examining the room.

Any expectations she had formed by no means prepared her for the change time had wrought in him. The moral degradation which convict life entails was vividly marked on him. His face had coarsened in every feature, a hard defiant look shone in his eyes, his slouching gait bespoke enforced humiliations. Looking at him she wondered if this could be the man she had once loved with all the force and tenderness of first affection. The horror and hate she had experienced during the last months of her life with him returned with increased force.

Something stronger than years of absence, more potent than painful circumstances separated them now as a gulf neither might cross again. The subtle evil his disposition had developed with passing years could never be bound by a common link with the forces of her character which

solitude and thought had strengthened and purified. Sundered by the differences of their moral natures, they stood apart as children of diverse races.

Throwing himself with an affectation of ease he entirely lacked into the chair recently occupied by Ulic Tarbert, the Rev. Amos Berkeley, otherwise Jacob Glender, said:

“So I have found you at last, Mrs. Amos Berkeley.”

She visibly winced at sound of a name not heard for years; the tone of his voice vividly recalled scenes of indescribable pain.

“And glad I am,” he continued, glancing around, “to find you in such easy circumstances.”

“Why have you come here?” she asked.

“To see you, of course,” he replied, with a grin.

“What is it you want?”

Something in her self-possessed manner warned him of the change time had wrought in her since they parted, and a sense of disappointment fell upon him. She might not prove the easy dupe he had expected to find.

"I want my wife." He uttered the words slowly and deliberately, watching their effect upon her as a doctor might the process of narcotics on his patient.

Save that the blood faded from her face, she gave no other indication of her feelings by word or movement.

"My time," she said presently, seeing he made no attempt to continue, "is much occupied. I feel satisfied you have come for some purpose, state it and leave me."

Her coolness surprised and provoked him; he set his massive jaws determinedly, and then said, "You have asked me to state my purpose. I have come here for you—my wife."

The room swam round her; the fear haunting her quiet years was suddenly realized; the avalanche which had threatened her life had fallen. She was not, however, prepared to endure this fate, and had long since determined on resistance should it assail her. Therefore, recovering herself, she said, quietly and resolutely:

"Were we to live a century, you and I could never be more to each other than strangers."

"The law shall enforce you to live with me."

"Never. I should welcome the social disgrace which the public knowledge that I am your wife would entail, rather than live with you under what change of name you please to assume."

She heard him curse her, but paid no attention to his words.

"Listen," she continued; "you come here labouring under the impression I am

the cowed, dejected woman from whom you parted. I was then little more than a child. Friendless, helpless, ignorant of the world, the sorrow you cruelly thrust upon me crushed my spirit; but I have changed since then. Years have brought experience. You who of all others were bound to protect me, weighted my youth with misery, betrayed my trust, mocked my affection, gave me a coward's blow. All this I bore submissively then; but that period of my life being passed, new strength was given me, and rather than live under one roof with you, I would welcome death itself."

The fervour of her words brought conviction of their truth to his mind. He had made a mistake in believing the woman who had been his former victim would become his present dupe. The proposal of claiming her as his wife had been made without intention of carrying it into execu-

tion, but solely from a desire to alarm and thereby obtain from her certain demands he had come to make. His object having failed, he proceeded to make a fresh move.

“Well,” he said, striving to assume an air of ease, “if we don’t live together, we can at least share our property with each other.”

She looked at him with quiet scorn. “You mean that I should share my money with you?”

“If you choose to put it in that way—yes.”

“Then you are again mistaken.”

“What’s yours is mine in the eye of the law, and, by heavens, I’ll have it.”

“You forget,” she said, “the Married Women’s Property Act.”

He had not forgotten it, but trusted her ignorance of its existence would befriend him. He clenched his teeth and looked at her with vengeful eyes.

"Look here," he said doggedly, "let us have no more beating about the bush. You are rich, I need money. Give me five hundred pounds. Keep your name and your secret, but let me have the cash."

The expression of his face and tone of his voice brought back recollections of days and nights of fear and misery. She nerved herself to resist him.

"You shall not have any money from me," she said.

He stretched across the desk and whispered :

"Take care, take care, or you may drive me to that which will ruin you."

"No act of yours," she replied, "can injure me in the world's sight, so long as I keep apart from you."

"You force me to speak in plainer terms. What's yours is mine, and if I cannot have it by fair means I will have it by foul."

“Do you mean,” she asked, some idea of his threat flashing on her mind, “you will have recourse to forgery?”

“I may be tempted to write your name upon a cheque. Bring me to justice, and the world shall learn it is a wife who prosecutes her husband; it will be a nice story for all your fine friends.”

“If you have such intentions,” she replied, “I give you fair warning to beware of your danger. From this date my bankers shall be advised to carefully examine the signatures of my cheques. If a forgery is discovered, as I am a living woman, the law shall deal with you as with a common criminal. I am not going to buy your silence or submit to my ruin.”

He left his chair and came close to her side, his hands clenched, his face distorted by rage; but she neither shrank from him nor cried for help, though

Tarbert's name was on her lips. Her heart beat rapidly and her nerves quivered from excitement, yet she strove to be brave, knowing much depended on her preserving the appearance of courage. She lifted her eyes to his, and he retreated before her gaze, muttering to himself.

This woman whom he had formerly regarded as the slave of his wishes, and expected to find fearful of his influence and pliant to his desires, defied him. For some minutes he stood leaning against a bookshelf, not knowing what move he should next make, and unwilling to own himself defeated.

Her fear of him in no way abated, his presence was no less irksome than at his first entrance, and she felt the interview must end quickly or strength and courage would desert her. She strove, however, to maintain their semblance to

the last, and summoning all her fortitude, began :

“You see I reject your proposals and defy your threats ; but I now of my own free will make a proposition, which if you are wise you will accept.”

He nodded his head by way of intimating his attention.

“Most men with experiences such as yours,” she said, “would be glad to lead a new life if opportunities were offered them. I shall place them in your way. My solicitor will pay you two hundred a year, provided I never see or hear from you again. If ever you come to my house, write to or molest me, from that day your pension shall be suspended. This sum will allow you to live honestly, take the chance it affords you, and now go.”

The expression of his eyes as he looked at her sent a shudder through her frame.

“Come,” he said, “your bite is worse

than your bark. Make it double the sum and I take you at your word. It isn't every day," he added with a chuckle, "a woman can secure her liberty for four hundred a year; few husbands would prove so reasonable as I, but then I'm not one of the jealous sort, you see, and am willing——"

"The sum I have named," she interrupted, refusing to hear more, "will place you above temptation. I shall not increase it by even a pound. Let me know your decision at once; I shall not repeat my offer."

"Well," he answered, "two hundred a year is not to be despised."

"You will remember the conditions."

"Though they may be hard for an affectionate husband to maintain, I'll think of them."

"I suppose you have no desire to be known as the Rev. Amos Berkeley?"

“Right you are,” he replied with an air of audacity. “Set me down as Jacob Glender!”

She wrote the name; then taking an envelope, gave him the address of her solicitors. He twirled the paper in his fingers before thrusting it into his pocket.

“Does payment date from to-day?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied briefly.

“Sorry I didn’t find you sooner, I’d have called like a dutiful husband.”

She made no reply.

His business had come to an end, but he lingered. “She has been too clever for me,” he thought, “but if ever the chance comes I shall make her pay heavily for this bargain.”

He looked round the handsomely appointed room and then at her, and slouchingly walked from her presence. With strained ears she listened to his

footsteps in the passage, and heard the street door bang behind him:

“Thank God it is over,” she cried, leaning back in her chair. Her overstrained senses gave way; the whole room swam round her, but in the last efforts for mastery made by her fleeting consciousness, she recognized as in a dream Ulic Tarbert’s anxious face bending over her. Then all was darkness and repose.

CHAPTER V.

A DARK DAY.

EARLY in September Mrs. Henry Netley and Lord Pompey Rokeway were made man and wife. The marriage had been celebrated with all the pomp and state, glitter and show dear to Mrs. Netley's heart. No hint that the church service, celebrated by a learned prelate, assisted by doctors of high degree, canons of dignified mien, and a surpliced choir, merely ratified a commonplace bargain such as public markets witness daily, escaped the polite lips or was betrayed in the gracious glances of Lady Pompey's guests.

At the wedding breakfast the bride of fifty summers sat shivering in filmy gar-

ments ; beside her the semblance of a man, wigged, rouged, padded, and stayed, yet ghastly, as if Death himself, tricked out in finery, had taken his place at the board to mock the marriage feast.

The Duke of Bloomsbury, who, taking Mrs. Netley's wealth into consideration, had given his consent to the alliance, was present, and continually mopped his red-rimmed eyes with a handkerchief, not because of their tears, but of their tenderness. The duchess likewise attended, and breakfasting over heartily, for a subsequent week visited the irritability of indigestion equally on her aged poodle and her illustrious husband.

His grace made a feeble speech which no one understood, during which, without ceasing to masticate, his consort grumbled audibly, probably by way of expressing her dissent to his mild remarks, as was her invariable custom. When later on

the saintly bishop, with florid face and ample girth, made flattering references to the noble and happy pair united that morning in the holy bonds of matrimony, Lord Pompey tittered, and in a loud tone shrewdly remarked to himself, "Gad, he'll expect a handsome fee; deuce take him if he don't," to the evident discomfort of his lordship and the amusement of his hearers.

Throughout the feast Lady Pompey's heart beat high with exalted satisfaction and gratified pride. She had secured the distinction ardently sought; the duke had graciously given her the tips of his trembling fingers to shake, and congratulated her on the alliance with his brother; whilst the duchess had condescended to inquire the nationality of her cook who served the repast. Had the Italian *chef* been a slave, Lady Pompey would have given him to her grace on the spot, but

being a free man and a great artist, he expected a liberal salary, and the duchess, as the world knew, was penurious.

Presently the happy bride and bridegroom drove away to one of the duke's country residences, where they were to spend their honeymoon, whilst congratulations savouring of that delightful exhilaration begotten by champagne rang in their ears. Then the merry guests who had taken part in this interesting farce went their divers ways, gratified that their dear friends and kind hosts, Lord and Lady Pompey Rokeway, had by this marriage afforded them subject for laughter and ridicule which must at least last nine days.

From the ducal residence Lord and Lady Pompey proceeded to the continent, where they resolved to spend the winter and early spring.

Meanwhile the last months of the year

had for Philip Amerton worn away with a sense of undefined fear and sombre uneasiness he could neither fathom nor dissipate. So far as he might judge by outward signs, no storm threatened his peace; yet a depression, vague, subtle, and untraceable, gradually crept over his mind and weighted his life. There had been times in the past when he had known dejection, but reaction had duly followed. Now, however, this nameless care deepened with every hour. He felt as one travelling a lone and unknown path through profound darkness, fearful of some impending peril and conscious of utter helplessness.

Weeks passed, but no rift appeared in the cloud; one heavy day followed another, and merged into fateful blackness, as evening into night. From the depths of his soul he cried aloud, praying he might be freed from this weird, horrible, and

dream-like spell, but his words were lost in chaos and gained no response. Now, indeed, did he seem as one apart from his fellow-men; as little bound to the interests they shared, as slightly influenced by motives they obeyed, as if he had already passed the portals of death and walked a bloodless phantom in their midst. The old sense of weary loneliness and unbridged isolation deepened; the link which should have bound him to humanity was missing; he could never take hands with his kind and feel as they.

Perfect indifference to all things paralyzed his feelings; his heart was frozen as if grasped by death, and its chillness spread through his veins. The while, as light reflected through colour, his work assumed the tints of his mind, and the chapters he at this time wrote were marked by a gloom and horror afterwards long remembered. And, as in his

organization matter was subject to mind, his health gradually gave way. His wife had noted the change, but seemed powerless to hinder its effects. Now, indeed, more than ever did they seem estranged. He shrank within himself, and his personality seemed numbed by the depression overhanging him.

Awakened to a sense of danger by the scene through which she had passed with Colonel Tarbert, and grateful for her escape from dire temptation, Miriam had striven hardly to be a faithful wife, and in a thousand ways had pleaded for her husband's love. But though his words were ever gentle, some barrier she felt powerless to overthrow and unable to withstand effectually parted them. And her natural affections being beaten back upon her heart, as waves dashing against rocks are flung into the sea, she sorrowfully concluded Philip loved her no more,

and it was true indeed, she had become a burden to his life.

Then her thoughts turned to the man who had ever exercised an influence over one part of her nature, and that not the highest, and her peril became great. The gloom that had gradually and perceptibly fallen upon her husband had likewise its influence upon her. Failing as utterly to divert its descent as if she strove to waft darkness from the face of the earth, she slowly succumbed to its influence.

Yet the depression affected both in divers ways. To him its cause was unknown. Occasionally he regarded it as the shadow of an approaching ordeal in the path he had elected to tread, but no certainty of this was manifest to him, Benoni being at this time absent from England. Miriam conceived his gloom the outcome of sorrow and weariness through having taken her as his wife.

She had gleaned sufficient knowledge regarding the mystic life to become aware marriage was regarded as a hindrance to adeptship, and she no longer doubted this was the existence her husband wished to embrace. All that was highest and best in her nature still clung to him, but with Colonel Tarbert beside her the lower elements of her character triumphed, and sore danger threatened her. Therefore was she downcast.

And so this period of their lives was spent by both in mental darkness, and weariness of sombre days, and dread of what the future yet might hold.

Philip remembered that formerly when depression fell upon him, he had taken exercise by way of dispelling its effects. The weather being wet and dreary, had not recently permitted him to try this experiment, but one morning in December, the sun being bright and the atmosphere

clear, he resolved to start for a long walk. At breakfast he announced his intention of going to Wimbledon.

"I shall tramp to Old Wandsworth and have lunch at the Spread Eagle," he said, "and afterwards journey to Wimbledon Common, and remain there until sunset."

Miriam drew a short quick breath, and put her hand to her side, as if his words contained tidings of momentous importance.

"Must you go to-day?" she asked.

He looked at her across the table, with that weary expression she knew so well resting in his eyes.

"No," he answered, "not if you have made any plans requiring me to remain. Have you asked any one to lunch?"

"No," she replied.

"Then I shall go, for the morning is bright and the day will be favourable for a long walk."

There was no thought of her in his arrangements, she considered; in small things as in great, she had no place in his life.

“What do you intend doing to-day?” he asked presently.

“I shall call on Gal Alex in the afternoon,” she said, looking down. “It is her day. She has asked me to dine with her quietly afterwards, but I have refused.”

“It had been better if you accepted her invitation, because it will be uncertain when I get back. You need not stand on ceremony with so old a friend; stay to dinner with her, and on my return from Wimbledon I shall dine at the Garrick. “You will not feel lonely whilst I am away?”

“No,” she answered, in a low voice, bending over her cup.

“I fear you sometimes are, even when I am at home.”

"Sometimes."

"But you know men must work."

"Yes, and women must weep."

He looked at her quickly and keenly, striving to discover if she meant what she said. She met his glance with flushed cheeks and a faint smile.

"But you don't weep?" he said, in that tone which was wont to thrill her in olden days.

"No," she replied, shaking her head; "I only quoted, like a parrot."

He looked out of the opposite window thinking of her words and the tone in which they were uttered, wondering if she merely spoke at random or really felt the force of her remark. The question abided with and puzzled him all day.

He continued absorbed during the remainder of the meal; and she likewise maintained silence, but watched him narrowly. And ever and anon her face

flushed and paled, and she became restless from great nervousness. Occasionally it seemed as if she struggled to speak; anon she was lost in thought, whilst her head rested on her hand; and evidently she pictured some scene, for suddenly, with a low cry that surprised herself, she cried out:

“Philip!”

He started and said irritably, “What is the matter?”

“Nothing,” she replied, attempting to laugh; “I think I must have been dreaming. And now I forget what I was about to say,” she added hurriedly. “Oh, this is it; what time shall you be back?”

“About six or seven, I suppose,” he answered, rising from the table.

She watched his movements until he left the room. When he had put on his boots and got his hat and stick he came back, and glancing at her where she

still sat before her untasted breakfast, said carelessly :

“Now I’m off; good morning.”

“Philip,” she said, rising up and holding out her hand.

He crossed the room and kissed her forehead.

She listened to his footsteps in the hall, and then descending the stone steps leading to the road, and suddenly hurried to the window. He caught sight of her and lightly waved his hand.

And she remembered the look in his eyes many days.

The brightness of the sun and keenness of the morning air at first had little effect in rousing his spirits from languor. For once he failed to reflect nature’s mood, and the contrast of external light and vigour made him more conscious of his internal darkness and depression. By the time he had lunched at Old Wandsworth

and reached the Common it was two o'clock.

The wide open plain, with its far-stretching view bounded by the Surrey hills, brought him a sense of space and freedom that produced speedy relief. Had he been parted by fifty leagues from London he could not be more solitary.

Here he felt man might pour out the secrets and oppressions of his heart to his Creator, unseen, unheard, save by the whole court of Heaven. Some sense of peace, as if escape from his kind were well, filled his mind. Hours and seasons there are in most men's lives when, humanity becoming burdensome, they would fain escape its reach; when companionship growing irksome, solitude becomes a necessity. A longing rises within to step from the crowd, and, seeking loneliness, reverently stand face to face with nature. At such times the

worthlessness and barrenness of existence ; the strange pathos, futile joys, petty ambitions, tawdry triumphs, bitter griefs, sordid cares, and many errors of daily life ; the emptiness of all things lying beneath gilded surfaces ; the infinite possibilities of man's soul ; the wonderment of what has been and what may be ; vague speculations as to cause and effect ; vain yearnings for clearer sight and fuller knowledge ; dim consciousness of light behind the veil, flash upon the mind, leaving the thinker a man of sadder mind and humbler mien. The influence of such considerations of old sent hermits into deserts, nay, yet fills monasteries with weary-hearted men.

Such ideas flitting through his mind soothed Amerton by relieving him from his immediate sense of depression and placing him in the wider arena of considerations that had perplexed and troubled

thoughtful men of every generation. Then by degrees his natural perception of all things beautiful awoke. The wide undulating common, with its patches of heather and grass, islands of gorse and clumps of trees, became the background of a series of living pictures that passed before him as he rested on a wooden bench.

Away in the distance a boy with a colley dog slowly rose on the horizon, at first as mere specks against the blue, gradually gaining due proportions as they drew near. The boy's cheeks glowed with exercise, his eyes shone with health, the fresh wind rushed through his hair. Between him and his dog friendliest relations existed; the one spoke, the other obeyed; both ran and gambolled in joyous fellowship, and passed out of Amerton's sight. Next came in view a young horse-woman, whose rounded, graceful figure

was well defined against the strong light. Her horse reared capriciously, as if he would enjoy sport with his rider, who, bending over him, patted his neck and chided him. And she, galloping into distance, gave place to a solitary male figure in flannels, deep chested and broad shouldered as Hercules, light-footed and swift sped as Hermes, who rushed across the common scattering pieces of paper as he fled ; to be presently pursued by a cloud of flying followers in coloured shirts, wordless, fleet-footed, strong-limbed, athletic, keeping well abreast, and crossing the plain noiselessly as a flock of birds winging their way through air. Beyond, red-coated hurlers moved to and fro, making bright patches on the green. Hearing volunteers practise rifle shooting, Philip went forward to watch them ; and then strode further onwards, till soon fell the evening of this brief day.

Above the hazy blue of the Surrey hills, the sky was flushed with scarlet light, that gradually deepening to crimson, slowly faded to gold. Then came broad lines of tender green, changing to grey, and presently merging into shadow. Amer-ton turned to retrace his steps, but paused when he had reached some distance, and looked back. -

Where the sun had set, great perpendicular beams of light shot into the darkening sky. Seen from this desolate common, with night gathering round him, they seemed to Philip as vengeful fingers of a giant hand stretched out of heaven. The thought distressed and disturbed him, and as he turned to pursue his homeward course, the now deserted common bore a sad forlorn aspect. The patches of heath, gorse, and grass had turned to blackness, seeming to stain the wholesome earth, like plague-spots on the

world. The bark of a dog in the distance sounded menacing to his ears, and the wind sighing through the bare branches of a blighted tree, moaned with the tones of a human voice.

He had lingered too long, and now the sky was covered by unbroken darkness. An uncanny feeling seized possession of him, as if the bleak common were peopled with forms he could not behold ; and more than once he glanced behind in part belief some weird and fleshless procession of mocking fiends followed his path. As he strode rapidly forward the spirit of night walked with him. The black air sweeping past whispered words of strange import in his ears. A clump of shrubs dimly perceived at some distance appeared like distorted crouching figures of half human creation, that on his approach changed to twisted boughs and leafless brambles. Fears having no part in physical dread,

assailed him. The uneven surface of the common over which he trod seemed as the mounds of new-made graves; and the fluttering upwards of birds his footsteps disturbed, were to his fancy as a flight of souls on whose sacred rest he had intruded. Once a dead leaf helplessly whirled in air struck his cheek; he felt as if the withered finger of a skeleton hand thrust forward through darkness had touched him.

He had now lost his way, but believed if he pushed onward in a straight line he must gain the high road. He therefore hastened his steps, but the long twisted grass impeded him; briars stretched forward and clung to his arms; the sad babbling of a little brook, crying because of its loneliness, implored him to stay. No sound of human life greeted his ears. The space which before had been wide, was now boundless, all traces of circum-

ference being lost in universal blackness. And above other terrors of which these things seemed but a part, was an apprehension of unknown calamity. It was a blessed relief when, after great weariness, he found himself on the high road, within hail of humanity.

He was far too nervous and exhausted to seek his club and endure the conversation of acquaintances he might meet, and therefore turned homewards. The servant who opened the door looked at him curiously, but he passed in without heeding her. On inquiring if his wife had returned, he was told she had not; he then ordered dinner, believing she was dining with Gal Alex.

Having finished his solitary meal, he entered the study: the lamp was already lighted; taking up a book he sat down at his desk. As he did he saw a letter lying there, bearing his name in his

wife's writing. Supposing she wished him to call for her at Gal Alex's, or leave some other message, he opened the envelope and proceeded to scan its inclosure, but he had not read the first sentence when he laid it down again, brushed his hand across his eyes as if believing they deceived him, and then continued.

"Philip," the letter began, "I am going to inflict on you what may at first sight seem a wrong, but time will show it is best for both of us. It has been clear to me for many months you made a mistake in marrying me, that I have become a weight on your life, a hindrance to your purposes. I too have committed an error in wedding you. I am wholly incapable of making you happy, and I have at times been terribly miserable. Why should we endure for ever a bond that has become irksome to

both. A little courage and it is broken beyond repair. I take the step which parts us, for I am about to seek happiness with one who wished to make me his wife before I agreed to become yours. The law will right you, and then you will be free. We may never meet again. If this act of mine gives you pain at first, forgive me. It is taken to further our future peace.—Miriam.”

He laid down the letter, feeling stunned; his confused senses were as yet unable to grasp the full meaning of her words. Was it possible she who of all women held his faith and trust, she who once won his heart, whom still he loved, had now cast shame and dishonour on him? He crushed the note in his hand and flung it from him wrathfully; if a mere effort of will could have achieved his desire, he would then have torn all memory of her from his life.

But a few hours ago she had spoken gentle words to him, raised her face to receive his kiss, whilst the resolution to dishonour him lay in her heart. In a moment he had fallen from the heights of faith in womanhood down an abyss of bitter shame, and lay helplessly crushed, powerless to act or think coherently. She who had once made the world glad to his sight had wrecked his life, she whom he had chosen as his dearest friend had proved his bitterest foe. The disgrace of her act smote him deeply; he wished he had never seen her, and swore he would never look on her again.

Then it flashed upon him for the first time there was a partner in this act more guilty than she. At thought of this the blood ran hot in Amerton's veins, and evil thoughts swept through his mind as dark clouds crossing a winter sky. This man it was who had tempted her, stolen

her from her home, and repent how he might the wrong he inflicted could never be set right. Why should such men be permitted to live and wreck the lives of those around them? He would seek Colonel Tarbert and take revenge; the world was too small for both, one of them must die.

Then by a reaction of feeling he thought—no longer with bitterness and pain, but with sorrow and compassion—of her who was still his wife, for a question rose spectre-like from the confusion of his mind, and confronted him appallingly. Had he, her husband, done his duty by her? He could not answer as his heart desired, and he bowed his head in reproach and humiliation. He had sworn to love, cherish and protect her, but how had he kept his vow? He had regretted his marriage, and grown weary of his wife; whilst striving for what lay

beyond his reach, he had neglected that most concerning him; whilst gazing at the stars his feet had strayed into a morass. He had taken the love and devotion she offered him as if they had been merely his due, and the first weeks of his ardour having passed made her little return in kind. His promises had proved but empty words; surely the whole chivalry of his nature had fallen from him.

There were days, he remembered with keen reproach, when wholly absorbed in work, or lost in occult speculations, he had scarcely spoken to or heeded her. She had ceased to occupy any part of his life, to hold her proper place in his heart. He had not acted as her guide or counsellor, but assuming she was happy without troubling to ascertain if she were content, had taken his selfish solitary way through weeks and months,

suffering her companionship rather than cherishing her love.

If she had failed to understand his nature, sympathize with his moods, enter into his feelings, surely that was due to some lack in her mental organization, which he should have accepted as a blemish rather than resented as a fault. She must have known he had wearied of her, have felt he had repented his marriage. She had loved him once, of that nothing could dissuade him; and remembering her words to-day and the light in her eyes he could not but think some traces of her past affection lingered with her still. Had he but known his last kiss was to her the sign of farewell, what misery had both been spared.

He thought of the loneliness she must have endured, the pain his neglect caused her, the humiliation of considering herself a burden to him, the tempta-

tion which freedom and life with one who professed to love her must have offered. The fault of her elopement was solely his own; he had failed in his duty, and punishment had overtaken him. No feeling of bitterness towards her now rested in his mind; only compassion for her, and self-reproach. And as he sat there, thoughts of bygone days and memories of early love thronged around his desolate heart like winds that rush through open doors of drear deserted homes. He buried his head in his arms outstretched upon the desk, being weary with grief and torn with remorse.

Then, as time passed, he conceived a resolution of seeking his wife, and never resting until he had brought her back to his home, which yet was hers. She had said the law would right him, but to his mind no man had power to sever the spiritual union binding them in bonds

enduring through all time. The step she had taken could never be repaired, but he would rescue her from the life into which wrong and temptation had first led her. Her sin was insufficient to cast her from his home, for had he done his duty by her she had not erred. He never doubted she would return to him, and there and then resolved to devote his life to her. He would protect her from the sneers and cavils of the world, from the misery awaiting her. He would begin his search for her at once.

Suddenly he thought of Benoni: perhaps he could help him; he had been absent from town some months, but might have returned as suddenly as he had departed. And with remembrance of Benoni came a fresh train of thoughts. It was whilst following the teachings of the mystic this misery had crept into his life. True, he had embraced them volun-

tarily, and had been warned his search into mysticism would involve him in troubles that should test his strength; but he had not dreamt his sorrow could proceed from such a source.

Benoni must have perceived its coming, and yet had given him no word of warning, had not forefended him from dishonour. Amerton was sick at heart; torn by divers feelings, he knew not what to think. Was this grief but part of a fate destined to befall him from his entrance into life? Was it an experience necessary to a mission he was bound to fulfil? Whilst his wife was with him he had not valued her; now, being gone, he mourned her. Was he indeed but as a child with a toy, nay, was he himself but a plaything in the hands of an incomprehensible fate?

Summoning the servant, Philip learned his wife had left the house at midday,

taking a box with her. The maid had not heard any directions given to the cabman; her mistress, in departing, merely said she had left a letter in the study.

He scarce knew in which direction to begin his search. A faint hope rose in his mind that Benoni would in some way aid him—nay, might even still save him from dishonour and grief by exerting his powers to prevent Miriam's flight. If after all she was rescued and restored to him, how grateful he should feel. He would take this lesson to heart and henceforth live not for himself alone, but for her likewise.

Busy with these thoughts, he hurriedly left the house, and getting into a cab drove to Benoni's residence. His vivid imagination had seized hold of this hope for her delivery, and by the time he reached his destination he persuaded himself he

should find his wife safe in the mystic's home. The first sight of the bleak and lonely house, silent and dark, dissipated his expectations. Jumping from his cab, he rang the gate bell violently, so that the peal clamoured noisily through the quiet night. When the last toll died away, unbroken silence fell upon him oppressively. The tall poplar trees, like giant hearse plumes, waved slowly and sadly within the forlorn garden: the curtainless windows glared on him pitilessly. No lights moved within, no sound reached his ear. Unwilling to depart without ascertaining if Benoni had returned, he rang a second time, and again the bell woke many echoes through the dismal mansion. The waiting cabdriver looked critically at Amerton, and from him to the house, folded his arms, settled a rug round his knees, and resigned himself to the situation.

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For the third time Philip rang, on this occasion with violence begotten of impatience, and then to his unspeakable relief, heard some noise within. Bolts were slowly withdrawn, and a heavy door creaked. Amerton's heart beat with expectancy as the sound of footsteps echoed on the flagged pathway leading to the gate. When this was unlocked and thrown open, he beheld the figure of a charwoman. Holding up the lantern she carried to inspect her visitor, its light fell upon her wrinkled face, and was reflected in her dark eyes shaded by wiry brows; bushy grey hair escaped from her cap; her back was bent from age or infirmity. She had evidently been roused from sleep, and her expression was not of the most perfect amiability.

Silently and grimly she stared at Amerton, waiting for him to speak.

"Is Benoni at home?" he asked in a

tone tremulous from anticipated disappointment.

"No, he hasn't been here these three months."

"When do you expect him back?"

"It's more than I can say."

"Do you know where he is at present?"

"No. I don't know nothing of him," she answered, lowering the lantern and making a movement by way of indicating her desire the interview should end.

"Good-night," said Amerton, turning away sadly.

"Is that all?" replied the woman; whereon he turned back and put some silver in her outstretched hand.

He went back to his cab.

"Scotland Yard," he said in a troubled voice to the driver.

"Something's up," that individual muttered to himself, and away they sped.

Arriving at their destination, Amerton

presented his card and asked to see Inspector Collins, an officer for whose sagacity he entertained the highest respect. Being promptly shown into an office Mr. Collins presently entered, and being familiar with Amerton's name as a writer, regarded him with some curiosity. Philip explained that a lady in whose movements he was interested had left her home to elope with a military man.

The officer looking at him asked if the lady were a friend of his.

"She is my wife," he answered.

The words were easily spoken, but the pain and humiliation they caused wrung his heart.

"I must ask you to describe both parties," said the inspector, taking a book from his pocket preparatory to making notes.

Philip did as requested in a few graphic sentences.

"I merely wish to find some clue to where they have gone," he said.

"Yes, sir; we must trace them, and then it will be an easy matter to get witnesses for the case."

"I don't want witnesses," replied Amer-ton.

"No?" said the officer regarding him with evident surprise.

"No. I intend to follow them."

The idea of a duel in a foreign country, fought by an outraged husband and the man who had injured him, presented itself to the inspector's mind. He lay back in his chair, drummed his fingers on his chin, and said thoughtfully :

"Better leave the matter in our hands altogether, sir. It will be more satisfactory."

"No," answered Philip, "this is no ordinary case."

"That's what they all say," Mr. Collins remarked philosophically.

“They?”

“All husbands who come here; but after all we find one case much the same as another; but to every man his own misfortune seems the worst—that is if it happens to him for the first time.”

Amerton rose: the experiences of a detective officer were not calculated to raise his views of humanity.

“I have reasons,” he said, “for wishing to find and follow my wife. I shall thank you to let me know immediately you have found some clue to her route.”

“Rely on it, we’ll do the best we can for you, sir. I shall call on you the minute I have any news to communicate.”

Philip thanked him, took up his hat and departed. As he walked towards Charing Cross he saw Ulic Tarbert advancing with an absorbed air. He did not notice Amerton until the latter stood before him. That Ulic’s cousin had dealt Philip

the greatest wrong possible, was no reason it should be resented on one who was innocent. Amerton shook hands with him.

“Were you looking for me?” he asked.

“No,” answered Ulic. Then observing his friend’s face, he added, “Has anything happened—you look quite ill.”

“Something painful—unspeakably painful has occurred to me.”

“Nothing very serious I hope.”

“My wife has left me.”

“Left you for good?”

“Yes, eloped.”

“Good heavens,” he exclaimed—then added, “not with——” and paused.

“With Colonel Tarbert, yes.”

“The scoundrel,” said Ulic.

And then in silence he took Amerton’s arm, and walked part of the way with him towards his deserted home.

CHAPTER VI.

LORD KERRY CONVERSES.

DURING the forenoon of the day on which Mrs. Philip Amerton left her husband's house, Ulic Tarbert called by appointment on his cousin Lord Kerry. Instead of spending the winter abroad as usual, the earl remained in town, occupying the family mansion, a dark and cumbersome building situated in Lowndes Square. Entering this old and gloomy dwelling with its spacious marble hall and wide oak staircase, hung with family portraits, Ulic felt as if he had stepped into past ages.

Between the present Lord Kerry and Ulic a warm friendship had ever existed, principally sustained by correspondence

and perhaps the more firmly established from lack of continual intercourse. The healthy frankness and honest simplicity of Ulic's nature were fully appreciated by Lord Kerry; whom, on the other hand, his cousin admired for his brilliancy and worth. In the last century my lord would have been described in the ponderous dedications of humble scribes, as a man of parts. He had penned sonnets and composed songs, written a novel and contributed tales to magazines, knew the merits of a picture at a glance, was an excellent photographer and a skilled musician. He would readily have gained distinction in some branch of art had his health permitted the application necessary to the achievement of success.

His sympathy with distress was practically expressed by munificent gifts to charities, especially to hospitals treating the disease from which he suffered;

the poor ever found in him a helpful friend. The whole aim and object of his existence since his entrance into manhood's estate, was to acquire perfect health. Soon after his coming of age a painful spinal disease rendered him a helpless invalid for years; from which time the preservation of his life had become the study of his days. He had therefore visited renowned physicians in many countries; drank the waters of famous springs; tried the effects of various climes with some beneficial effect. But the fear of a malady from which he never wholly recovered was for ever before him, a dark curtain shutting enjoyment from life.

To have health he would have given the last penny he possessed, but that he desired most was not his. Like humanity at large, he was therefore dissatisfied with his lot; and whilst clinging to it tenaciously longed to exchange it ardently.

When Ulic entered the room known as the little library, he found his cousin lying on a sofa; cushions supported his back, a rug covered his legs, and a portable book-stand beside him held a novel which he skimmed. A mass of red brown hair and a thick auburn beard threw the pallor of his face into sharper contrast; under a broad forehead, large luminous eyes burned vividly; his features were sharpened by illness, their expression saddened by thought.

"Ah, Ulic," he said, moving aside the bookstand and stretching out his hands, "it is weeks since we have met."

"We have both been in town," replied Ulic, as if he would intimate his presence might be sought if required.

"So we have," replied Lord Kerry; "and probably it's because we are within hailing distance we remain apart. But

this must not be in future. Bring your chair here and sit near me."

"You are better to-day?"

"I am. You know that because you see me in good spirits."

"Yes; I noticed you were more cheerful than usual."

"I am always brighter when I am well. I think it must be easy for those who are healthful to be happy; and being happy, to love their kind. And yet they don't; do they, Ulic?"

"I greatly fear they don't."

"Now, if I were perfectly strong, instead of blood, the milk of human kindness would flow through my veins," he said, pathetically.

"No doubt. I believe it's those who suffer and sorrow feel deepest for their race; pain, either physical or mental, becomes the one touch of nature that makes them kin with misery."

Lord Kerry looked at him keenly.

"I dare say," he replied, "your words are true. But do you think if by some miracle I were made whole, given again the free use of my limbs, the full strength of my body—only think of it, Ulic—that in a couple of months I should become so used to my new condition, and therefore so indifferent to its blessings, that I would forget the poor cripples all over the land who lie helpless in their beds, peopling the wards of hospitals or exciting the tender care of homes."

"No. -Once you had experience of their state, you would probably ever after compassionate them. Only those who suffer can realize pain, and through this medium feel for its victims ; just as it is only sinners who are merciful, because knowing the temptation and bitterness of sin."

Lord Kerry put one hand on his cousin's shoulder, and said :

“What has happened to you?”

The younger man felt his cheeks grow red, but he promptly made reply:

“Nothing.”

Lord Kerry withdrew his hand suddenly, feeling he had not been answered.

“When I lived in Italy,” he said, “and felt the warm sunshine on my face, looked into the cloudless sky, and inhaled the balmy air, I felt it was a tragic thing a man should feel pain or grief whilst the world remained so fair. You in some way bring this memory back to me. It is pathetic to hear you, who should rejoice in the brightness of happy youth, talk of sin, sorrow, and suffering. For you such knowledge should not be; the dew of your young years should be fresh upon you; the morning sunshine of your life should know no shadow. What is your age?”

“Twenty-five.”

“And I am more than ten years your senior. You should rejoice, for now have you reached the most delightful period of your days. You are still young and unwearied; dreams of what may be visit your waking hours; the infinite possibilities of life stretch before you, like pathways from an unknown valley leading upwards to unsuspected heights; and you are yet removed by ten golden years from the half-way house of existence, gaining which, man pauses on the hill, and looks back upon the pleasant ways he has traversed, loth to continue the forward journey towards mist and cloud descending on his path.”

“You are a poet.”

“And it is we who would teach mankind, but they will not hear.”

“One of your tribe says we must count time by heart-throbs.”

“And he is right. But then, has your

heart throbbed unduly ? ” Lord Kerry asked, looking at him with an expression betraying not only interest but amusement.

“It has,” answered Ulic simply and honestly.

Lord Kerry sat up and gazed at him, this time quite seriously :

“Fate has not dealt with you according to your desires ? ” he said.

“No. I cannot tell you the whole story.”

“Be that as you please ; but, my kinsman, there is one question I would ask, and I must be answered freely and without reserve,” he added firmly, yet kindly.

Ulic looked serious :

“What is it ? ” he asked.

“Tell me if the course of your true love has been set aside for lack of such a materialistic consideration as gold ? For if so, I must——”

"You are a good fellow, Kerry, and I shall never forget this; but my disappointment has no concern with money. If want of wealth were the only hindrance I should work incessantly, do wonders to obtain my ends, but I am powerless to break the barrier parting me from happiness."

"Is there no one who can help you to contentment?"

"No one," answered Ulic dejectedly.

"You are certain of this?" Lord Kerry asked.

"Beyond all doubt," he replied sadly.

"And I daresay you feel miserable, my poor boy?"

"I am unhappy."

"And yet to be five-and-twenty and glow with health, and be in love; ah, what a blissful condition yours would seem to others. Surely, no man knows when he is happy."

The pathos of this speech appealed to Ulic forcibly. It struck him his grief was selfish, and he felt abashed. There was silence in the room for some seconds, each man being engaged by his own thoughts. This was at last broken by Lord Kerry, who, awaking from a reverie, exclaimed:

"Ah, what would I not give to be young and well."

"Luncheon, my lord," responded the butler.

At the same instant a valet entered the room, removed the rug, and handed the invalid a stick.

"Will you not take my arm," said Ulic.

"You are very kind," answered Lord Kerry, and they went towards the adjoining apartment, now used as a dining-room. The sun shining through the coloured glass of a deep bay window flung rich and rosy lights upon the Persian

carpet and the white damask of the table. A wood fire burned upon the broad open hearth, above which a chimney-piece of carved oak, black with time, rose to the richly embossed ceiling. Tapestry covered the walls.

“Tell me, Ulic,” said Lord Kerry, when they had almost finished luncheon and were therefore inclined for conversation; “tell me of the world; enlighten me regarding society. Who are now its lions, who its beauties? What man in your set talks best, what woman scandalizes most? You are, I’m sure, just now in the mood to describe it vividly; the zest of life will give fluency to your words, whilst your disappointment will give piquant bitterness to your pictures. And I am in the humour to hear, for you share my solitude for an hour, and this nectar, known to prosaic mortals as champagne, warms my veins.”

"What can I tell you?" asked Ulic.

"Any news from a land we once knew is interesting. Remember I only realize society exists from hearing it whirl past my doors late at night and early in the morning. There is no longer room for me within its charmed circle, for pleasure never makes place for pain."

"Some day you will be all right, and go back again."

"We will postpone the consideration," he answered with a wan smile; then added quickly, with an effort to overtake the light tone in which he had first spoken: "you haven't answered my questions. Is society still beset by the magnificent man who kills women by a glance? Does the elderly youth who is overwhelmed by the number of his conquests, the matron anxious to dispose of her daughters, the sycophant who smiles at all above and frowns at all below her

social level, the good-natured bore who tells foolish stories, the young lady who is disdainful because it suits her black brows, the damsel who lives with her head over one shoulder to exhibit her well cut profile, the pleasant fellow without an income who gives good dinners and plays cards, the stout man who rants, and the thin man who simpers—do they all hold their places as of yore?”

“All,” replied Ulic; “I suppose they are types endowed with eternal vitality.”

“Aye, there is the pity of it, boy.”

“I don’t know that it is; they amuse each other and instruct their spectators.”

“Perhaps you are right. They are all on a mental level, and desire no better company than themselves. Each is filled with the importance of his own petty purposes, futile aims, mean ambitions, pitiful desires, beside which the world at large, brimful of bitter wrongs and des-

perate sadness and woful tragedies, is as nought. Powdered, perfumed, painted, gay buffoons in brave apparel, they gambol and play with life as jugglers with double-edged daggers; mouth and leer at each other, cackle and cajole in feigned gaiety or honest idiotcy, making pretence of all they are not. Verily, they are a motley crowd, with here and there a giant in their midst, or a poet sad-eyed and sober because he has strayed from dreams of heroes, and finds himself in the company of fools. Come, we will have our coffee and cigarettes in the library."

They returned in silence. Lord Kerry lay back wearily on the sofa.

"You are fatigued," said Ulic, "because you have excited yourself in talking over-much."

"I am tired," he replied, a sudden change occurring in his mood; "but I am always tired. I suppose I shall rest

well one day soon. Nay, forgive me, Ulic, I should not have said this before you ; I didn't ask you to visit me that you might hear sad things, my cousin."

"Let me read to you a little, it may help to quiet you."

"Not to-day. Apart from the pleasure of seeing you, which is great, I want to consult you on a matter that has given me uneasiness."

"I hope I may be able to assist you."

"Thanks ; your common sense, I have no doubt will help me. But even if that be powerless to aid, I shall have made a confession that will ease my mind."

"You may place every confidence in me," said Ulic.

"I know that well." Then after a second Lord Kerry asked ; "When did you last see my brother Bob."

"A week ago, at the club."

"It is concerning him I wish to speak.

Do you know anything of his financial affairs? ”

“Nothing ; he has never mentioned them to me. We are little more than acquaintances, certainly we have never been friends, and are not likely to exchange confidences.”

“As you know,” said Lord Kerry, “I don’t communicate with him. We have never had two ideas in common, or entertained the slightest affection towards each other. He went his way, I mine. The fact of his being my brother didn’t necessitate our living under one roof, nor yet in one continent ; the world is large. As you are likewise aware, my father was not latterly on the best terms with him. He had twice paid Bob’s debts, but repeatedly refused to increase his income. He considered him extravagant, and was enraged against him some years ago on learning through our solicitor of some transactions which

Bob, speculating on his father's death and mine, had with the Jews. However, you will do me the justice of believing I never interfered between them."

"Certainly," replied Ulic.

"Very well; now comes the point which troubles me. A week after my return from Italy, my father casually remarked, one night, he had received a letter from Bob, stating he was again involved in debt, and requesting the sum of three thousand pounds. I asked if he had sent the money, and he replied determinedly he had not, nor should he, and spoke strongly on the subject. Seeing the matter irritated him, I did not again refer to it, nor did he. It therefore completely passed from my mind until a fortnight ago, when looking over my banker's account I saw a cheque for five thousand pounds had been paid to Bob. Much surprised at this I turned to my father's diary, believing I should

find some entry there, showing he had changed his mind with regard to paying Bob's debts. There was no such memorandum in the book. The receipt of his application was recorded, and two days later a line ran 'Wrote to my son Robert refusing his demand.'"

"I suppose," said Ulic, "he subsequently altered his mind and sent the money, though forgetting to record it in his diary."

"I had come to that conclusion when it struck me I would look at the cheque and see when it was drawn. My bankers sent it me. It was dated a day when my father, being seriously ill, never left his bed; it was cashed on the second morning succeeding his death."

"That is singular," said Ulic, who in blank perplexity stared at the wall above Lord Kerry's head.

"But more singular still, in the wording

and signature of the cheque I cannot quite identify my father's writing."

"Then," said Ulic starting, "you suspect it to be a ——" and he paused.

"A forgery," replied his cousin, supplying the word.

"This is terrible."

Both men looked at each other in silence for some seconds.

"In the top drawer at the right hand side of that escritoire you will find an envelope, please hand it to me."

When it was given him he took out a cheque and passed it to Ulic. "Now," he said, "examine it carefully, and say if you agree with my opinion."

Ulic carried it to the window, and observed the writing closely and critically.

"If it is not your father's handwriting," he remarked, after the lapse of a couple of minutes, "it is the most wonderful imitation imaginable."

“You are right; but the more I look at it, the more I am convinced my father never wrote it. No one was more familiar with his penmanship than I, and therefore no one is better able to pronounce an opinion concerning its authenticity. At first sight I believed the cheque was in his writing; on a second inspection, I changed my mind. Look at it again, and you will see any marked characteristics are carefully imitated; but letters devoid of individuality are not so accurately followed. For instance, look at the word ‘five.’ My father always formed his F by making a single downstroke, and crossing it half way: this is done here, but then the remaining letters in the word, affording less grasp of character, are without a certain subtle formation that would distinctly mark them as his to one accustomed to his writing. Of course the variety of a man’s caligraphy, caused

by using a steel or quill pen, by writing in sun or candle-light, when calm or agitated, must be taken into consideration. Yet I feel assured the cheque was never written by my father."

"That is a serious conclusion," replied Ulic, taking his place beside Lord Kerry.

"I know it is. I haven't mentioned my suspicions to any one, save you; not even to my solicitors, whose advice, perhaps, I should take; nor to my bankers whom I should put on their guard; for the hand which so skilfully imitated my father's writing could also forge my name."

"Then," said Ulic, "believing it a forgery, you have no doubt regarding the guilty party."

"Common sense points to my brother as the culprit. He received the money; either he or an accomplice drew the cheque."

"I cannot say I have ever entertained a high opinion of his honour."

"I greatly fear he never had any."

"What is best to be done?"

"That is a consideration that has disturbed me greatly. It is not the money I so much regret, but the meanness of the theft. It grieved me to think Bob could be guilty of this deed."

"Perhaps he is not."

"I sincerely wish I could believe him innocent."

"Do you purpose taking any steps in the matter, or will you let it be?"

"Whilst suspicion amounting to conviction rests in my mind, it would be unfair to my brother if I didn't give him an opportunity of proving his innocence."

"You are right."

"Therefore, Ulic, I want you to do me a service."

“With all my heart it shall be done.”

“Will you call on Bob, see him privately, tell him I have found a cheque for five thousand pounds drawn in his favour, and bearing my father’s signature, which I believe to be a forgery? Mark his face the while. Make no mention of my father’s diary, but ask him if he can offer any explanations that will help to remove my opinion. If he is innocent, as I heartily hope he be, then he will state under what circumstances he became possessed of the cheque, and how my father came to change his mind. If not, it will show him I am on my guard, and prevent him attempting another forgery.”

“I shall carry out your instructions as best I can.”

“I would ask him here, and state my suspicions to him, but a certain restraint exists between us which might prevent his

being communicative to me. I haven't seen him since my father's death, nor for years before that event. At my father's written request, I have not increased Bob's annuity; perhaps he expected I should, but under the circumstances I cannot."

"I perfectly agree with you."

"Do you happen to know any of his associates?"

"So far as I can see he has no intimate friends, though having a large circle of acquaintances."

"He must have friends for all that; and if he doesn't wear them on his sleeve, it's because they are not presentable. And amongst them must be his accomplice, for I believe he would not be able to imitate his father's writing so cleverly. Keep your eyes open, my dear Ulic, and see if Bob knows any man whose character will not bear the light

of day. And now adieu, I'm tired. Come and see me soon again," he concluded, lying back wearily on his cushions.

"I certainly shall."

"Come in the morning with brightness and sunshine as your meet attendants. You exhale mental and physical health, and are good for weary eyes to gaze on. Yes, come in the forenoon, for I am always at my best in the early part of day, but as it wanes I grow exhausted. I believe my life will fade out with the light some evening, then will come darkness and rest."

"No, no," replied Ulic, looking down at him compassionately; "not darkness and rest, but happiness and light."

"If I could feel assured of that," he said sadly.

"You will one day."

"Ah, dear Ulic, hope sounds in your voice; come to me soon again."

Ulic left the gloomy house, passed through the bleak court-yard, and getting into a cab, drove to Colonel Tarbert's rooms in Piccadilly. His mission was not pleasant, and he considered he had better, by accomplishing it at once, rid himself of a burden. His knowledge of the colonel's character, together with the evidence of the diary, convinced him Lord Kerry's conclusion was right; yet having a strong sense of justice, Ulic was anxious to hear the colonel's explanation before finally condemning him.

On reaching his destination, he walked gravely upstairs and rapped at a door bearing his cousin's name.

"Come in," cried a voice, certainly not the colonel's.

The visitor did as desired, and then paused in wonder and dismay. The whole apartment was in a state of confusion; the furniture being hustled into a corner

that greater space might be afforded for the boxes, portmanteaux, clothes, books, and papers strewing the carpet. In the midst of this chaos, a pewter pint measure by his side, a pair of trousers in his extended arms, knelt a man whom Ulic recognized as his cousin's servant.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, struggling to his feet.

"Is your master at home, Lane?"

"No, sir," the man replied.

"When do you expect him back?"

"Well, sir, he's gone out of town."

"For long?" asked Ulic, as he more carefully surveyed the room.

"That's more nor I can say, Mr. Ulic. He went quite sudden to-day, leaving me behind, and a deal of packing I had."

"Can you give me his address?"

"I don't know it, sir," the man replied with a quiet smile.

Ulic was about to leave when the sound

of a heavy step on the stair was heard, and a second later a man with a square face and massive jaw entered the room. Ulic at once recognized the Rev. Amos Berkeley. He looked round the apartment wondering and gave a low whistle.

"Moving, eh?" he said to the servant, with whom he seemed on familiar terms.

"Moved," replied Lane briefly.

"Gone?" he asked in tones betraying disappointment and displeasure.

"Out of town."

"Do you know when he will be back?"

"In a few weeks."

"Not leaving these quarters?"

"No."

"Well, I'll call another day." He looked at Ulic full in the face, nodded to the servant, and departed.

When he was beyond earshot, Ulic remarked casually :

"I fancy I know that man, but I can't remember his name."

"He's Jacob Glender, a sporting man, sir."

"Ah, of course. Gives Colonel Tarbert advice, doesn't he?"

"That's it, Mr. Ulic; a clever fellow."

"Come here often?" Ulic inquired carelessly.

"Well, sir, pretty often."

"Good-day," said Ulic.

He descended the stairs soberly and sadly, for he had no longer a doubt on his mind concerning the colonel's committal of the forgery.

CHAPTER VII.

PHILIP'S SEARCH.

AMERTON was now weighted by trouble as a burden from which there was no relief. Helpless in his grief, he was as a reed shaken by the wind. His affection for Miriam, which he believed had died out of his life, now she was no longer his, fully awoke, and the greatness of his sorrow was but the measure of his love.

Returning alone to his home on the night of her flight, his senses mocked him with illusions of her presence. As he sat in the study striving to form plans for his search, he started repeatedly, now believing her footfall echoed in the passage outside, anon convinced her voice sounded in an ad-

joining room. At such times he was thrilled by hope, surmising she had repented her design and returned to him; his heart beat rapidly, his hearing was strained to catch some vibration confirming first impressions; but silence fell upon him with sickening weight and chilled his expectations to numbness.

And as time passed the sorrow which mocks itself with thoughts of joys long dead visited him. He remembered the happiness that had been his in the first weeks of his married life, and mourned that its duration had been brief.

It was almost midnight when the street door bell rang sharply through the house. This time there was surely no delusion. The servants had retired; he rose quickly and opened the door, and with a sense of disappointment, followed by a feeling of satisfaction, beheld Inspector Collins.

"You have some news for me?" he asked.

The Inspector nodded his head, and Amerton led the way into the study. The detective sat down, placed his cap on the floor near his feet, and unbuttoning his coat produced a pocket-book. Philip watched him turn over its pages filled with closely written notes, wondering how many secrets they held, what clues they gave to acts of crime and wrong.

"I can't exactly say, sir," he began, "that I have traced the parties in whom you are interested; but a gent answering the description you gave, and a lady, whose face was covered by a thick veil, left Charing Cross station by the evening train for Paris."

"Could it have been them?" he asked.

"I'll read you the notes made by one of our men. You see some members of

the force are always on duty at the principal stations. Trained to observe, they notice not only people wanted, but also such as attract their attention or rouse their suspicion. Notes are then made which sometimes prove of service. Now sir, one of our men named Green, being at Charing Cross station when the evening train left, noticed a lady closely veiled ; she seemed nervous and impatient. When speaking to the gent who accompanied her, her voice was low as if she didn't wish to be heard, and she continually looked round as if expecting or dreading notice. When the gent had got their tickets she entered a first-class carriage, and sat in a corner where she was freest from observation. This naturally attracted Green's notice and he made the following notes. 'Lady—medium height, plump, erect figure, wearing long black cloak. Gent—broad-shouldered and stout

prominent grey eyes, heavy moustache, no whiskers or beard, military air, dressed in grey tweed suit and round hard hat.' ”

Amerton groaned aloud.

“Rather like the gent you described, sir.”

“I have no doubt it's the same.”

Satisfied with this admission, Inspector Collins shut his book with a gratified snap, and replaced it in his breast pocket. “May I ask, sir,” he said, “if I can be of any further service to you?”

“I think not at present, unless you will give me the address of a Parisian detective on whose shrewdness I can rely.”

“Then you intend ——”

“To follow them to Paris, yes.”

“In that case you cannot do better than consult Monsieur Tange,” said the inspector, producing a small leather case

and handing Amerton a card. "He is a man of genius, with the eye of a hawk and the instinct of a bloodhound. If you want to trace the parties, ask his advice and take it, sir."

Amerton wrote a cheque for the inspector's service, and accompanying him to the door bade him good-night.

Left alone once more he no longer sat down to bewail his fate; resolved on performing a duty, his strength of character rose to aid its accomplishment. For the next few hours he was busy in packing his portmanteau, and writing brief notes to editors and publishers, announcing his intended absence, the extent of which he could not determine. Then overcome by mental and physical fatigue he lay down, and strove to rest. But sleep fled before the haunting thoughts and distracting memories rising before him in the darkness of night. Each slow-

paceing hour teemed with pictures, in which his wife was the principal figure, and when daylight came he hailed it with unspeakable relief.

Morning saw him on his way to Paris. He was now consumed by impatience to behold his wife and bring her back to the home she had abandoned. He felt no uncertainty regarding the decision she would make, being convinced she would return with him. With every mile of the journey his spirits rose, believing he should soon stand face to face with his wife, and rescue her from the tempter.

The fatigue and excitement he had undergone during the last twenty-four hours overcame him, and he slept in the train whirling him through France. His slumbers however were not peaceful, for as in his waking hours so was it in his sleep; his wife's face was before him, now smiling on him as in the early days of

their married life, now gazing at him in mute reproach, finally fleeing from him terrified and saddened. Then it seemed they two stood alone in a vast world of profound silence; no motion of life was perceptible, no sound of moving things in heaven or on earth came to his ears. The air was heavy from nameless oppression: he would have cried aloud, but articulation became impossible; she who was with him could speak no word or make no sign. Even as he gazed, her face and form grew indistinct; fear fell upon him that she was dead: in an agony of apprehension he stretched forward his arms towards her; they embraced space, and he woke with a moan to find himself entering Paris.

Before he had been many hours in the capital, he had obtained an interview with Monsieur Tange, from whom he learned that two persons answering to the

description of Miriam and Colonel Tarbert had that evening left for Turin. Philip determined to continue his pursuit the following morning.

Meanwhile his impatience allowed him no rest. Doubt arose in his mind as to whether the detective had mistaken the identity of his wife and her lover; and thinking and hoping they might yet be in Paris, he mixed among crowds on the boulevards, scanning every face he met, and visited the principal theatres in hope of finding the objects of his search. It was morning when he returned to his hotel weary and dejected; next day he departed for Turin.

Here he encountered vexations that would have daunted a resolution less strong than his. The Italian police were wholly devoid of the penetration or sagacity of the French detective force, and could afford him no help. One officer

indeed declared he had seen two such persons as Amerton described, but on cross-examination their height and general appearance proved to be wholly unlike them. The officials had no sympathy with his search. The fact of a lady preferring another man to her husband was of such common occurrence in their experience as to be scarce worthy of notice. In speaking to him on the subject they could hardly repress their smiles, and Amerton secretly felt he was an object of wonder and amusement to these merry men.

One of them, a grey-haired grandfather who had seen the world, ventured to impart portion of his philosophy to the grave-faced Englishman. The signor, he considered, should take consolation in considering the lady had evinced bad taste in leaving a husband so brave and gentle. But women were strange creatures, and

seldom appreciated their lawful spouses ; it was their way. He would assume the liberty of reminding the signor the world was large, and kindly heaven had peopled it with beautiful women. It was not for him to boast, but assuredly it was universally acknowledged the daughters of Italy were fair and loving ; there were many of them, he had no doubt, would willingly comfort and console the signor in his great sorrow.

Philip turned from him in disgust, and left the philosopher to mourn over the uncourteous savages of England.

It was clear to Amerton he must not expect much help from the Italian police. Resting on the assurance of Monsieur Tange that the object of his search had started for Turin, it occurred to him she might yet be here, and accordingly he lingered in this picturesque town, frequenting churches, palaces and galleries

in hourly expectation of finding her. But his search was futile, and no day passed but he was tortured by thinking that the man whom of all others he most detested was with her. It seemed cruel to think he was powerless to rescue her, to assure her no anger rested in his heart against her, only compassion and forgiveness.

A thousand times he called upon Benoni, but in this hour of need the mystic seemed to desert him. Had Benoni but humoured him in his folly to deride him in his misery; or was this sorrow a trial through which he must necessarily pass? He remembered Amuni had said that in his onward course temptation would assail, grief attend, and humiliation lie down with him; for 'twas only when he had sown in pain and sorrow he might reap in peace and joy. He scarce knew if he should blame Benoni for this desertion, for in his present bewilder-

ing condition his thoughts became wholly confused.

And he to whose eyes the world had never seemed fair, now beheld desolation descend upon all things; for hope was wrenched from his heart as a tree is uprooted from the ground, and all the world was sad.

But though discouraged and disheartened by the failure of his search, he still resolved to find his wife and bring her back to his home. This was a reparation he felt assured he owed her, and from his purpose no man might gainsay him. Losing all clue of her at Turin, he resolved on allowing his pursuit to be guided by chance; for in the tumult of his present feelings the voice of intuition seemed lost. He therefore travelled to Genoa, where he again made inquiries of the police, with a result not less unsatisfactory than at Turin. After spending some days here he

left for Pisa and from thence proceeded to Florence.

Revisiting cities where not two years since he had spent the first weeks of his married life, was inexpressibly painful to him. Scarce a street in these well-remembered towns but brought back recollections which smote him sorely. Here was the hotel at which they had stayed, there the cathedral they had entered together, beyond, the palaces before which they had stood in wonder and admiration. Every stone had a memory which called out to him, and day by day a sickening feeling fell upon his heart because of all that had been and was not.

Up and down thoroughfares filled with life, colour, music and motion; in and out of cathedrals crowded with worshippers and supplicants, he passed, a pale-faced wanderer sad amongst his contented kind. With the interests and pleasures of those

around him he had no concern, he was dead to all things save his untiring search. Each morning he rose with resolution undaunted; every night saw his pursuit unsuccessful. His perseverance, however, was not to be shaken and seemed at last about to be rewarded.

One day a member of the police informed Philip a lady and gentleman, answering in all respects the description given by him, had passed that morning through Florence in a train starting from Arezzo and journeying to Rome. The gentleman had alighted at the station, but returned immediately to his carriage. Hearing this news Philip left by the next train for the capital; but here all trace of those he sought vanished. Rome was indeed crowded by English and American visitors; but according to the police, none of them seemed to correspond with the details Amerton gave. Having now consider-

able experience of the carelessness of the Italian police, this fact did not dishearten him; he therefore determined to continue his personal search.

Days of pain and weariness now succeeded each other. Galleries, gardens, streets, ruins, palaces, churches were visited by him continually. More than once it indeed seemed as if he had found his wife; a slight resemblance in a profile, a similarity in height, made his heart beat quick from expectation; but he became plunged in greater despondency on discovering his disappointment.

Three months had now elapsed since he had left England. Ulic Tarbert wrote to him continually, but gave him no tidings of her concerning whom he most wished to hear. With Lady Pompey who was in Spain he held no communication. When he had spent several weeks in Rome, he resolved to leave the city, yet knew not in what

direction he should pursue his quest. No thought of returning home whilst his mission was unsuccessful occurred to him; so long as his wife remained under the protection of another man he could not resume his former life.

How many months more he might continue a wanderer he dared not think. His health, never strong, had under strain of excitement and stress of fatigue more than once threatened to give way. The one object occupying his thoughts night and day drove him almost to distraction. His life he acknowledged was ruined; his popularity as a novelist had received a serious blow by the abrupt discontinuation of his serial story in an important magazine; and his future productions, and consequently his income, must of necessity suffer because of his enforced idleness from literary work. Yet so long as life was left him would he search, throughout

the world if necessary until he found his wife. From this fixed thought he never departed.

On an evening when he felt more tired and depressed than usual, he passed the church of Trinita de' Monti, and hearing sounds of music floating towards him, entered within its doors. The interior was unlighted, save for tapers burning on the high altar, and dim yellow lamps glimmering before shrines. The Gothic arched transept and side chapels were wrapped in shadows; he could but indistinctly perceive the dames du Sacré Cœur and their pupils kneeling with bowed heads within the choir.

Taking a little rush-bottomed chair, he seated himself near a pillar, and listened to the pure sweet voices of these young girls, rising and falling in plaintive supplication to the accompaniment of a mellow-toned organ. His receptive nature

yielded to the influences around him. The hour, with its fading light and gathering shade ; the church with its vision of white veiled, sweet-voiced worshippers ; its radiant altar gleaming through clouds of incense ; its chapels with wondrous pictures and marble statues whose white outlines seemed ever and anon to vibrate with sudden life in the gathering gloom, impressed him strongly. The world with its vortex of pleasures, its whirlwind of passions, its burden of sorrows, had no place in this home of prayer. The spirit of peace dwelling in its atmosphere slowly crept into his heart ; a weight was gradually lifted from his soul ; healing balm fell upon wounds that had bled overmuch because of their depth ; and a sense of grateful rest filled him with comfort he had not known for long. Overcome by his emotions he buried his face in his hands and prayed.

The plaintive music which had lulled him almost to unconsciousness suddenly ceased, but he dared not move; the odour of incense became stronger and more strong; and save for the faint tinkling of a little bell, the air was tremulous with silence; a benediction fell upon him. When presently he raised his head the church was almost deserted. The sisters and their pupils had quietly vanished; the altar lights were extinguished; the priest and his acolytes had disappeared.

Leaving the church with lingering steps he crossed the roadway, and leaned on the broad old balustrade overlooking the flight of wide time-worn steps descending to the Piazza di Spagna. As he did the bell of a neighbouring church suddenly rang out the Ave Maria, and was answered faintly in the far distance. Then from every

belfry throughout the length and breadth of the city came the chiming of bells, clashing in a medley of sweet sounds, ceasing suddenly as if for breath to begin anew, all impatient meanwhile for faint responses that rose from distant convents without the city gates, and quiet monasteries surrounded by the dreary Campagna.

When this farewell to day was hushed to silence, darkness swiftly fell upon this capital of many memories; for already the sun had gone down as a cloud of fire behind the black dome of St. Peter's; and the countless towers, turrets, and belfries of churches, the terraced roofs of houses, and columned fronts of palaces, lying in a tangled mass between the distant Vatican and the hill of Monta Trinita were quickly lapsing into general indistinctness. In the Piazza di Spagna below Philip saw shops gleam brightly, and watched the light of street lamps

spring into existence down the narrow Via de' Condotti, opposite where he stood. Beyond these specks of flame all was darkness.

The swift death of this fair day, begun so brightly, bore some affinity to the sudden cloud that had fallen on his life. He watched the deeper blue of night cross the sky, and saw the first stars spangle in their spheres. No sound disturbed him; time passed unheeded.

Scenes in the history of Imperial Rome, blood-stained and triumphant, cruel and regal, rose before him. Where were now the actors who had taken part in these civil wars and brilliant pageants; of what account to them the power and glory for which they had sacrificed much? These things they sought abided not; neither had they; all that was mortal of them had passed into nothingness and

night, and only ruins and fragments remained to tell that they had been.

An icy breath sweeping past his cheek suddenly recalled his thoughts, and without beholding it, he became conscious of a figure standing beside him, even as the blind feel the warmth of sunlight without perceiving its rays. A slight shudder ran through his frame; but for a second he was incapable of movement. Then, with an effort, he turned round expecting to see Benoni, and beheld his wife standing near. Her downcast face was pallid; her blue eyes gazed into his beseechingly; her pale lips parted as if to speak.

"Miriam, Miriam," he exclaimed, stretching out his arms, forgetful of the past in his satisfaction of the present. But without a word she glided noiselessly aside, and vanished from his sight.

"Miriam, Miriam," he cried aloud,

unable fully to comprehend what he had seen, but no response came from the darkness. "O, God," he cried out, "leave me at least my senses." He did not doubt he had veritably beheld his wife, yet could not understand for what purpose this vision had appeared. Then a thought flashed upon him, which made him pause. Surely she was no longer of this earth. He remembered the deathly pallor of her face, the ethereal light in her eyes. Had her spirit travelled from the bounds of another world to entreat pardon for the wrong she had wrought? His mind grew confused from fears memories and surmises rushing upon him.

Leaving the spot where he had stood, he descended the steps, and reaching his hotel immediately went to his bedroom. The candles on his dressing-table were lighted, and near the mirror he per-

ceived a little note directed in Benoni's writing. Hastily tearing it open he read the following words: "Peace be on you. Return homewards; we shall meet in London.—BENONI."

END OF VOL. II.

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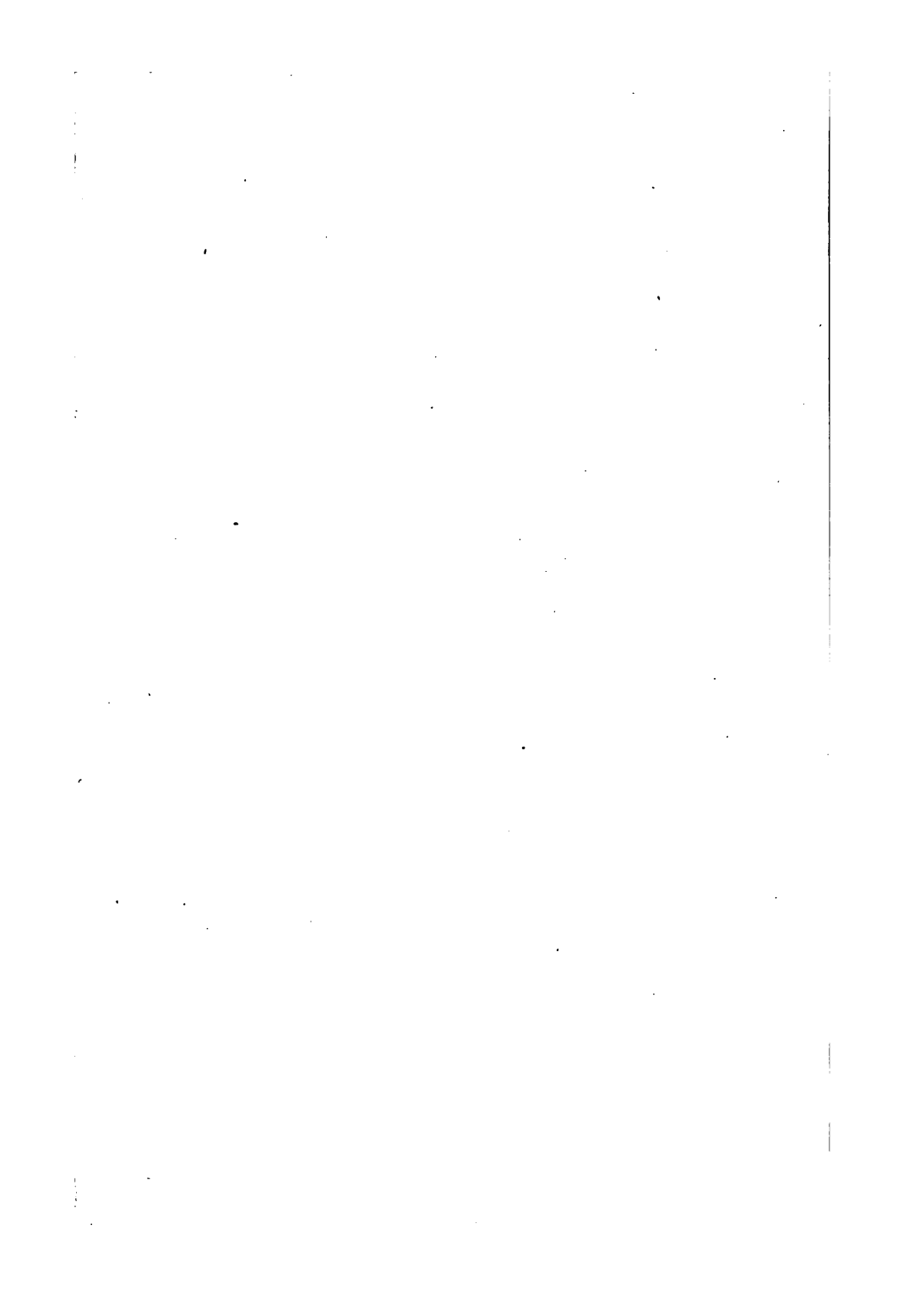
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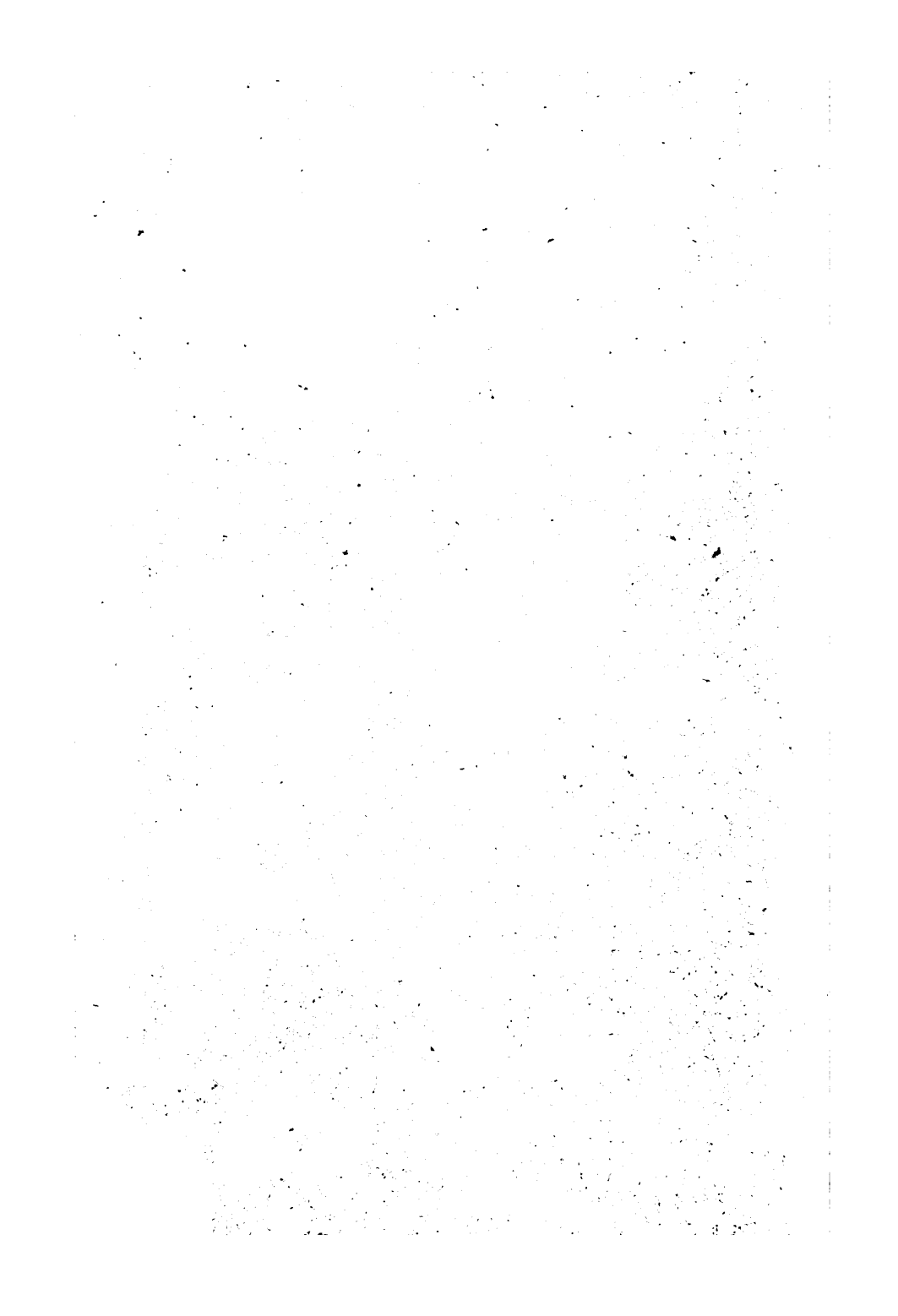
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